

"I AM ZLATAN"

By Zlatan Ibrahimovic as told to David Lagercrantz

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This book is dedicated to my family and friends, to those who have stood by my side, on good days and bad.

I also want to dedicate it to all the kids out there, those who feel different and don't fit in.

Those who are seen for the wrong reasons. It's OK to be different. Continue being yourself. It worked out for me.

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## CHAPTER 1

Pep Guardiola, the coach in Barcelona, with his grey suits and troubled face, came up to me looking concerned.

I thought he was all right at that time, certainly not a Mourinho or Capello, but an ok guy. This was way before we started our war. It was the fall of 2009 and I was living my childhood dream. I was playing in the best team in the world and had been welcomed by 70 000 people at the Camp Nou. I was walking on clouds. Well maybe not entirely, there were some bullshit in the papers. I was the bad boy and all that. I was difficult dealing with. But still, I was here. Helena and the kids were also good. We had a nice house in Esplugues de Llobregat and I felt fully charged. What could go wrong?

"Hey you", Guardiola said. "Here in Barca we keep our feet down on the ground."

"Sure", I said. "Fine."

"Here we don't drive any Ferraris or Porsches to training."

I nodded, didn't go cocky on him, like how the fuck is what car I'm driving your concern? But I thought "What does he want? What message is he giving me? Believe me, I don't need any fancy cars or parking on the sidewalk to show off anymore. That wasn't it. I love my cars. They're a passion of mine, but I sensed something else behind his words. Kind of: don't think you're so special.

I had already at that point understood that Barca is like a school. The players were all nice, nothing wrong with them, and there was Maxwell, my old friend from Ajax and Inter. But honestly, none of the guys acted like superstars, and I thought that was odd. Messi, Xavi, Iniesta, the whole gang, was like school kids. The world's best players stood there nodding, and I couldn't understand that. It was ridiculous. If a coach in Italy says "jump", the players ask "what? Why should we jump?"

Here, everyone jumped at any command. I didn't fit in, not at all. But I was thinking: Accept the situation. Don't confirm their thoughts about you. So I started adapting. I became too kind. It was insane. Mino Raiola, my agent, my friend, said:

"What's wrong with you Zlatan? I don't recognize you."

No one recognized me, not my buddies, no one. I became boring, bland, and you should know that ever since Malmö FF I've had one philosophy: I run my own race. I don't give a damn what people think and I've never felt comfortable with authority. I like guys who run the red light, if you know what I mean.

But now... I didn't say what I wanted. I said what I thought people expected of me. It was wack. I drove the club's Audi and stood there nodding like back in school, or like I should have stood nodding back in school. I didn't give my team mates any crap. I was boring. Zlatan wasn't Zlatan, and that hadn't happen since back in school when I saw chicks in Ralph Lauren shirts for the first time and almost shit my pants when I was asking them out. But still, I started the season great. I scored goal after goal after goal. We won the UEFA Super Cup. I was shining. I dominated. But I was somebody else. Something had

happened, nothing serious, not yet. I had been silenced, and that's dangerous, believe me. I have to be mad to play well. I have to shout and make scenes. Now I kept all that within me. Maybe it had to do with all pressure. I don't know.

I was the second most expensive transfer in history, and the papers kept saying I was a problem child and had issues with my personality, all kinds of bullshit, and unfortunately I felt the weight of it all - in Barca we don't stick out, and I guess I wanted to show that I could fit in. It was the most stupid decision of my entire life. I was still killing on the field. But it wasn't as fun anymore.

I even thought about quitting football. Not that I would break my contract, I'm a professional. But I lost the fun. And then came Christmas break. We went to Åre and I rented a snowmobile. Whenever life stands still, I want action. I always drive like a maniac. I've gone 325 km/hr in my Porsche Turbo, leaving chasing cops behind. I've done so many fucked up things I barely want to think about them. And now in the mountains I was giving it my all on the snowmobile, got freeze burns and had the time of my life.

Finally some adrenaline! Finally the old, the real Zlatan, and I were thinking to myself: Why am I doing this? I have money. I don't have to feel shit with idiot coaches. I can have fun instead and take care of my family. It was a great time, but it didn't last long. When we returned to Spain disaster struck. Not immediately, but slowly. Disaster was in the air.

A light snowfall came. It was like the Spaniards had never seen snow before, and in our hood, in the hills above Barcelona, cars were smashing to the left and right, and Mino, the fat idiot - the wonderful fat idiot I should add if anyone would misunderstand me - froze like a dog in his summer shoes and light jacket and convinced me to take the Audi. It almost ended in disaster. On a downhill street we lost control of the car and smashed into a stone wall. The whole right side of the car was demolished. Many had crashed during the bad weather, but no one as badly as me. I won the crash contest too, and we laughed a lot about that. And I was actually feeling like myself sometimes. I felt ok. But then Messi started talking. Messi is awesome. Fucking unbelievable. I don't know him very well. We are very different personalities. He came to Barca 13 years old and is brought up in their culture. He doesn't have any problems with that school shit. In the team, the play revolves around him, which is natural really. He's brilliant, but now I had come, and I was scoring more than he did. He went to Guardiola and said:

"I don't want to play on the right side, on the wing, anymore. I want to be in the middle."

That was where I was. But Guardiola didn't give a shit. He changed tactics. From 4-3-3 he switched to 4-5-1 with me on top and Messi right behind, leaving me in the shadow. All balls went through Messi and I couldn't play my game. I have to be free as a bird on the field. I'm the guy who wants to make a difference on all levels. But Guardiola sacrificed me. That's the truth. He locked me in up there. OK, I can understand his situation. Messi was the star.

Guardiola has to listen to him. But come on! I had scored goal after goal in Barca, I was lethal too. He couldn't adapt the team after one single guy. I mean: why the hell did he buy me then? No one pays that kind of money just to strangle me as a player. Guardiola had to think of both of us, and of course, the mood amongst the club management became nervous. I was their biggest investment ever, and I didn't feel good in the new lineup. I was too expensive not to feel good. Txiki Begiristain, the sports director, was pushing me; he said I had to speak with the coach.

"Work it out!"

I didn't like it. I'm a player who accepts the situation. But sure, fine, I did it! A friend of mine said "Zlatan, it's like if Barca bought a Ferrari but are driving it like a Fiat", and I thought, yeah, that's a good argument. Guardiola had transformed me into a simpler, worse player. And the whole team was losing from that.

So I went to the coach. I approached him on the pitch, during training, and I was careful about one thing. I didn't want a fight, and I told him:

"I don't want to fight. I don't want a war. I just want to discuss things."

He nodded. But maybe he looked a bit frightened, so I repeated:

"If you think I want a fight, I will leave. I just want to talk."

"Good! I like talking with the players."

"Listen!" I continued. "You are not using my capacity. If it was a goal scorer you wanted, you should have bought Inzaghi or someone. I need space, and to be free. I can't run up and down constantly. I weigh 98 kilos. I don't have the physique for it."

He was thinking. He was often doing that.

"I think you can play like this."

"No, then its better if you bench me. With all due respect, I understand you, but you are sacrificing me for other players. This isn't working. It's like you bought a Ferrari but are driving it like if it was a Fiat."

He continued thinking.

"OK, maybe it was a mistake. This is my problem. I will work it out."

I was happy. He would work it out.

But then the ice cold came. He would barely look at me, and I'm not one who really cares about such things, and despite my new position I continued to be great. I scored more goals. Not as nice ones as in Italy. I was too high up on the pitch. It wasn't Ibracadabra anymore, but still... Against Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium in the Champions League we outplayed them completely. The stadium was boiling. The first twenty minutes were amazing, and I scored one goal... two goals. Beautiful goals, and I was thinking: Screw Guardiola! I'll run my own race! But then I was substituted, Arsenal came back and scored two goals. It was shit and afterwards my thigh hurt. Normally a coach cares about such things. An injured Zlatan is a serious thing for any team. But Guardiola was ice cold. He didn't say a single word, and I was out for three weeks. Not once did he face me and ask "How are you feeling, Zlatan? Can you play the next game?"

He didn't even say hello. Not a word. He avoided looking at me. If I entered a room, he would leave. What's going on? I was thinking. Have I done something? Do I look strange? Am I speaking strange? My mind was spinning in circles. I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about it constantly. Not that I needed Guardiola's love or anything. He could hate me all he wanted. I'm triggered by hate and revenge. But now I lost focus, and I talked to the other players. No one understood what was going on. I asked Thierry Henry, who was on the bench during this time. Thierry Henry is the top scorer in the history of the French national team. He's cool. He was still amazing, and he was also having problems with Guardiola.

"He doesn't greet me. He doesn't look me in the eyes, what has happened?" I asked.

"No idea", Henry said.

We started joking about it. "Hey, Zlatan, has he looked at you today?" "No, but I saw his back!" "Congratulations, things are improving!" Shit like that, and it helped a little bit. But it was really getting on my nerves, and I asked myself every hour: What have I done? What's wrong? But I never got any answers. Nothing more than that the ice storm must have had to do with our talk about my position. There couldn't be any other explanation. But that would be twisted. Was he psyching me out because a chat about my position? I tried confronting him, I'd walk towards him try looking him in the eyes. He turned around. He seemed scared, and sure I could have booked an appointment and asked "What is this about?" But never. I had done enough crawling for that guy.

This was his problem. Not that I knew what it was. I still don't know it. Or, well... I don't think the guy can handle strong personalities. He wants nice school boys. And worse: he runs away from his problems. He can't look them in the eye, and that made everything so much worse.

It got worse.

The ash cloud from the volcano on Iceland came. No flights at all in Europe and we were going to San Siro to face Inter. We took the bus. Some brain-dead person in Barca thought that was a good idea. I was free from injuries then. But the trip became a disaster. It took 16 hours and we were all worn out when we arrived in Milano. It was our most important game so far that season, semifinal in the Champions League, and I was prepared for mayhem, booing and whistling at my old arena, no problems, that drive me. But the situation a part from that was terrible. And I think Guardiola had a hang up on Mourinho.

José Mourinho is a big star. He had won Champions League already with Porto. He was my coach in Inter. He's cool. The first time he met Helena he whispered to her: "Helena, you only have one mission. Feed Zlatan, let him sleep, keep him happy!" The guy says what he wants. I like him. He's the leader of an army. But he also cares. He was sending me text messages all the time in Inter asking how I was

feeling. He's the opposite of Guardiola. If Mourinho lights up a room, Guardiola pulls the blinds." I guess Guardiola now tried to measure up to him.

"It's not Mourinho we are facing. It's Inter", he said, like we thought we'd play ball with the coach. And then he pulled his philosophy crap.

I was barely listening. Why would I? It was advanced crap about blood, sweat and tears, shit like that. I've never heard a coach talk like that. Pure garbage. But now he finally came up to me. It was during the practice at San Siro, and people were there watching, like "Wow, Ibra is back!"

"Can you play from start" Guardiola asked.

"Definitely", I answered.

"But are you prepared?"

"Definitely. I feel fine."

"But are you ready?"

He was like a parrot, and I got some nasty vibes.

"Listen, it was a terrible trip, but I'm in good form. The injury is gone. I'll give it my everything."

Guardiola looked as though he doubted me. I didn't understand him, and afterwards I called Mino Raiola. I call Mino all the time. Swedish journalists use to say: Mino is bad image for Zlatan. Mino is this and that. You want the truth? Mino is a genius. I asked him:

"What does the guy mean?" None of us understood. We started losing it. But I got to play from start and we scored 1-0. Then the game turned, I was substituted after sixty minutes and we lost 3-1. It was shit. I was furious. But in the earlier days, like Ajax, I could dwell on a loss for days or even weeks. Now I have Helena and the kids. They help me forget and move on. And I was focusing on the return game at Camp Nou. The return game was incredibly important and the excitement was building up, day by day.

The pressure was incredible. It was like thunder in the air, and we had to win big to advance. But then... I don't even want to think about it, or, well, I do. It made me stronger. We won by 1-0. But that wasn't enough. We were eliminated from the Champions League, and afterwards Guardiola looked at me like it was my fault, and I was thinking: The bottle is empty now. We're out of playing cards. After that game it felt like I wasn't welcome in the club anymore, and I felt bad driving their Audi.

I felt like shit sitting in the dressing room and Guardiola would stare at me like I was a problem, some freak. It was insane. He was a wall, a stone wall. I didn't get a single sign of life from him, and I wanted to get far away every second.

I was no longer part of the team, and when we played Villa Real he let me play five minutes. Five minutes! I was boiling inside, not because I was on the bench. I can deal with that if the coach is man enough to say: You're not good enough, Zlatan.

But Guardiola didn't say a single word, nothing, and at this point I'd had it. I could feel it in my entire body, and if I was Guardiola, I would have been scared. Not that I'm a fighter. I've done all kinds of crazy shit. But I don't fight, well, on the pitch I've knocked one or two out. But still, when I get angry, my eyes turn black. You don't want to be anywhere near. And let me tell you in detail what happened. After the game I went into the dressing room, I hadn't exactly planned some raging attack... But I wasn't happy, to use mild words, and in the dressing room my enemy stood, scratching his bald head. Few others were in there. Touré and a few others, and the big metal box where we put our clothes, and I was staring at the box. Then I kicked it. I think it flew like three meters, but I wasn't done yet. Far from it. I yelled:

"You have no balls", and probably some worse things, and added:

"You shit yourself in front of Mourinho. You can go fuck yourself!"

I went insane, and maybe you'd expect Guardiola to say something, maybe: Calm down, you don't talk like that to your coach! But he's not like that. He's a weak coward. He just picked up the box, like a little cleaner, and then he left and never talked about it again, nothing at all. But of course words spread. In the bus everyone was crazy:

"What happened, what happened?!"

Nothing, I thought. Just a few words of truth. But I didn't have the energy talking about it. I was so pissed off. My coach had frozen me out week after week without explaining why. It was sick. I've had some bad fights before. But the day after we'd always sorted things out and moved on. Now the silence and terror

just continued, and I thought: "I'm 28 years old. I've scored 22 goals and 15 assists only here in Barca, and still I'm treated like I don't exist, like air. Should I accept this? Should I continue adapting? No way!

When I understood I'd be on the bench against Almeria, I remembered those words: "Here, in Barca, we don't drive Ferrari or Porsche to the practice!" What bullshit was that anyway? I drive what I want, at least if it pisses off some idiot. I jumped into my Enzo, floored it and parked outside the door at practice. Of course it resulted in a circus. The papers wrote that my car cost as much as the monthly salary for the entire Almeria squad. But I didn't care. Media bullshit meant nothing at this point. I had decided to give back.

I decided to fight back seriously, and you should know one thing, that's a game I can play. I've been a bad boy before, believe me. But I didn't want to mess with the preparations just because of that, so obviously I called Mino. We always plan the smart and dirty tricks together. I also called my buddies.

I wanted different perspectives on the situation, and oh god, I got all kinds of advice. The Rosengård guys wanted to come down and "trash stuff", and of course that was nice of them to offer, but it didn't feel like the right strategy at that point. And of course I discussed everything with Helena. She's from another world. She's cool. She can also be tough. But now she tried encouraging me:

"You've become a better dad. When you don't have a team where you feel good, you team up with us", she said, and that made me happy.

I played some ball with the kids and tried to make sure everyone was feeling alright, and of course I spent time with my video games. It's like a disease for me. They eat me up. But since the time in Inter when I could play until four, five in the morning and go to practice after just a couple of hours sleep, I've set some rules for myself: no Xbox or Playstation after 10 at night.

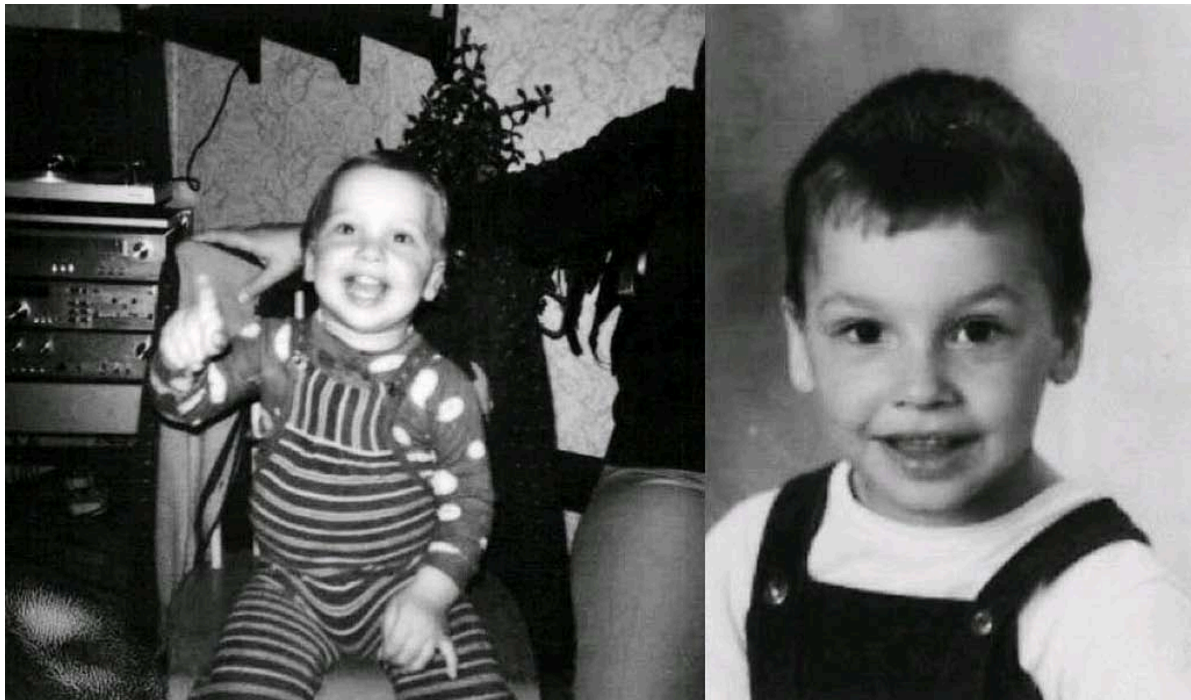
I can't let time run away from me, and during these weeks in Spain I really tried to spend time with my family and just chill in our garden. I even had a Corona now and then. That was the good side of it. But at nights when I would be lying awake, or at practice when I saw Guardiola, the dark side of me woke up. The anger was pounding inside my head and I planned my next move and my revenge.

No, I realized it more and more, there was no turning back. It was time to stand up for myself and become the real me again.

Because don't forget: You can take the kid away from the ghetto, but you can't take the ghetto away from the kid.

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The feet





Ibra & Sanela on dad's blue Opel Kadett



## CHAPTER 2

My brother gave me a BMX bike when I was little. I called it Fido Dido.

Fido Dido was a tough little bastard, a cartoon guy with spiky hair. I thought he was the coolest. But the bike got stolen quickly outside the Rosengård bathhouse and my dad went there, with open shirt and sleeves rolled up. He's the kind of guy who says: No one touches my kids! No one steals their stuff! But not even a tough guy like him could do anything about it. Fido Dido was gone, and I was devastated.

After that I started stealing bikes. I'd smash the locks. I became great at it. Bang, bang, bang, and the bike was mine. I was the bicycle thief. It was my first "thing". It was pretty innocent. But sometimes it got out of control. Once I dressed up in all black, went out into the night like fucking Rambo and got a military bike using a huge bolt cutter. And sure, that bike was cool. I loved it. But honestly, it was more the kick I got out of it than the bike. It triggered me sneaking around in the dark, and I'd throw eggs at windows and that kind of stuff and I was only caught sometimes.

One embarrassing thing happened at the Wessels department store out at Jägersro, for example. But honestly, I deserved it. Me and a friend were wearing huge winter down jackets in the middle of summer, quite fucked up, and under those jackets we had four table tennis rackets and some other crap we picked up. "You guys, aren't you paying for those" said the guard who caught us. I pulled out a few pennies from my pocket: "With these?" But the guy didn't have a sense of humor, so I decided to be more professional from then on. And I guess I became quite a skilled maniac in the end.

I was a small kid. I had a big nose and I lisped and went to a speech coach. A woman came to my school and taught me how to say S and I thought it was demeaning. I guess I wanted to assert myself somehow. And it was like I was boiling inside. I couldn't sit still for more than a second and I was running around all the time. It was like nothing bad could happen to me if I ran fast enough. We lived in Rosengård outside

of Malmö and it was full of Somalis, Turks, Yugoslavs, Poles, all kinds of immigrants, and Swedes. We were all acting cocky. The smallest thing got us fired up, and it wasn't easy at home, to say the least.

We lived on the fourth floor up on Cronmans Road, and we didn't run around hugging each other. No one asked "How was your day today little Zlatan", nothing like that. No grown-ups would assist with homework or ask if you had any problems. You were on your own, and you couldn't whine about someone being mean to you. You just had to bite the bullet, and there was chaos and fights and some punches. But sure, sometimes you'd wish for some sympathy. One day I fell off the roof at the kindergarten. I got a black eye and ran home crying expecting a pat on the head or at least some kind words. I got a slap in the face.

"What were you doing on the roof?"

It wasn't like "Poor Zlatan." It was "You fucking idiot, climbing up a roof. Here's a slap for you", and I was shocked and ran away. Mom didn't have time for comforting, not at that time. She was cleaning and struggling to make money, she was really a fighter. But she couldn't take much else. She had it tough, and all of us had a terrible temper. It wasn't like the normal Swedish chat at home, like "Honey, can you please pass me the butter", more like: "Get the milk you jerk!" There were doors slamming and mom crying. She cried a lot. She has my love. She's had a tough life. She was cleaning like fourteen hours a day, and sometimes we'd tag along, emptying trashcans and stuff like that and got some pocket money. But sometimes mom lost it.

She'd hit us with wooden spoons, and sometimes they broke, so I had to go buy a new one, like if it was my fault she'd hit me that hard. I remember one day in particular. I had thrown a brick at kindergarten that somehow bounced and broke a window. Mom freaked out when she heard about it. Everything that cost money freaked her out, and she hit me with spoon. Bang, boom! It hurt and maybe the spoon broke again. I don't know. Sometimes there were no spoons at home, and then she'd come after me with a rolling pin. But then I got away, and I talked with Sanela about it.

Sanela is my only full sibling. She's two years older. She's a tough girl, and she thought we should play some games with mom. Fuck, hitting us in the head! Insane! So we went to the store and bought a bunch of those spoons, really cheap ones, and gave them to mom as a Christmas present.

I don't think she got the irony. She didn't have room for that. There had to be food on the table. All her energy was consumed by that. We were quite a bunch at home, also my half-sisters who later disappeared and broke all contact with us, and my younger brother Aleksandar, we'd call him Keki, and the money wasn't enough. Nothing was enough and the older ones to care of the younger, otherwise we wouldn't have made it. There was a lot of instant macaroni and ketchup, and eating at friends' homes or at my aunt Hanife's who lived in the same building. She was the one of us who came to Sweden first.

I wasn't even two years old when my mom and dad got divorced, and I don't remember anything about it. That's probably good. It wasn't a good marriage, I've heard. There were a lot of fighting, and they had gotten married for my dad to get a residence permit. I guess it was natural for all of us to end up living with mom. But I missed my dad. He had more going for him and there was always something fun going on with him. Me and Sanela would meet dad every other weekend and he used to come in his old blue Opel Kadett and we'd go to Pildammsparken or out on the island in Limhamn to get hamburgers and soft ice cream. One day he made a splurge and got us each a pair of Nike Air Max, the cool sneakers that were like over a thousand kronor, really expensive. Mine were green, Sanela's pink. No one in Rosengård had shoes like that, and we felt so cool. We had it nice with dad and we'd get some money for pizza and Coca-Cola. He had a decent job and only one other son, Sapko. He was our fun weekend-dad.

But things would change. Sanela was awesome at running. She was the fastest at running 60 meters in her age in all of Skåne [ed note: region of southern Sweden] and dad was proud as a peacock and used to drive her to practice. "Great, Sanela. But you can do better", he said. That was his thing, "Better, better, don't settle", and this time I was in the car. Dad remembers it like that anyway, and he noticed it immediately. Something was wrong. Sanela was quiet. She struggled not to cry.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"Nothing", she answered and then he asked again and she told.



We don't have to go into details, that's Sanela's story. But my dad, he's like a lion. If something happens to his kids he goes wild, especially when it comes to Sanela, his only daughter. And it became a huge circus, with interrogations, social welfare investigations, custody battles and shit. I didn't understand too much of it. I was turning nine.

It was the fall of 1990 and they kept that stuff away from me. But I had my hunches of course. It was turbulent at home. Still, not the first time. One of my half-sisters did drugs, some heavy shit, and kept stashes at home. There was always chaos around her, and creepy people calling and a lot of fear that something bad would happen. Another time my mom was arrested for stashing stolen goods. Some friends had told her: "Take these necklaces!" and she did it. She didn't understand. But the stuff was stolen and the police came bombarding in and took her. I remember it vaguely like a weird feeling: Where's mom? Why is she gone?

But after that latest thing with Sanela she was crying again, and I just ran away from it. I was messing around outside or playing football. Not like I was the most balanced guy, or the greatest promise. I was just one of the kids kicking ball, or actually worse. I had some terrible outbursts. I'd headbutt people and lash out against my teammates. But I had the football. It was my thing, and I was playing all the time, in our yard, on the field, during school breaks. We went to the Värner Rydén school at that time. Sanela in fifth grade, and me in third, and no one doubted which one of us was well-behaved! Sanela had to grow up at young age and become an extra-mom for Keki and take care of the family when the sisters left. She took a huge responsibility. She behaved. She wasn't the girl who got called to the principal's office, and that's why I became worried immediately when I got the call. We were both asked in for talks, and like, if only me had been called, it'd been normal, just routine. But now it was me and Sanela. Had someone died? What was going on?

I got stomach pains, and we walked through the corridor. It must have been late fall or winter. I felt paralyzed. But when we came into the office my dad was sitting there with the principal, and I felt happy. Dad used to mean fun stuff. But wasn't fun. Everything was stiff and formal and I felt very uncomfortable, and honestly, I didn't get much of what was said, only that it was about dad and mom, and it wasn't any pleasant stuff. But now I know. Now, much later, when working on this book, the pieces of the puzzle have come in place.

In November 1990 the social services had done their investigation, and dad had gotten custody of me and Sanela. The environment at mom's place was decided bad for us, not so much because of her, I have to say that. There were other things, but it was a huge thing anyway, a major disapproval, and mom was devastated. Would she lose us as well? It was a disaster. She cried and cried and sure, she had been hitting us with spoons, given us beatings and not listened to us, and she'd had bad luck with her men and there was no money and all that. But she loved her kids. She was just raised under tough conditions, and I think my dad understood that. He went to her the same afternoon:

"I don't want you to lose them, Jurka."

But he demanded some improvement, and dad isn't to play games with in situations like that. I'm sure there were harsh words. "If things don't improve, you'll never see the kids again", stuff like that, but I don't know exactly what happened. But Sanela lived with dad for a few weeks, and I stayed with mom, despite everything. It wasn't a good solution. Sanela didn't like it at dad's. She and I found him sleeping on the floor around that time, and the table was full of beer cans and bottles. "Dad, wake up, wake up!" But he kept sleeping. It was a strange thing for me. Like, why does he do this? We didn't know what to do. But we wanted to help. Maybe he was freezing? We covered him with towels and blankets to get him warm. But I didn't understand anything. Sanela probably understood more. She had noticed how his mood could swing and how he could explode and scream like a bear and I think that frightened her. And she missed her little brother. She wanted to go back to mom and I wanted the opposite. I missed my dad, and one of those nights I called him, probably sounding desperate. I felt lonely without Sanela.

"I don't wanna live here. I wanna be at your place."

"Come here", he said. "I'll call a cab."

There were new investigations by the social services, and in March 1991 mom got custody of Sanela and dad of me. We separated, me and sis, but we have always stayed close, or let's say, it's been up and

down. But we are very close. Sanela is a hairdresser now and sometimes people come to her salon and say: "My god, you look like Zlatan!" and she always answers: "Bullshit, he looks like me." She's tough. But none of us have had an easy ride. My dad, Sefik, moved from Hårds road in Rosengård to Värnhems square in Malmö in 1991, and you have understood this - he's got a big heart, he's prepared to die for us. But things didn't turn out the way I had expected. I knew him as weekend-dad who got us hamburgers and ice cream.

Now we were to share every day and I noticed immediately: it was empty at his place. Something was missing, maybe a woman. There was a TV set, a sofa, a book shelf, and two beds. But nothing extra, no comfort, no well-being, and there were beer cans on the tables and trash on the floor, and sometimes when he got going and started wallpapering, he'd only do one wall. "I'll do the rest tomorrow!" But it never happened, and we also moved a lot, and never really got settled anywhere. But it was also empty in another way.

Dad was a caretaker with the worst working hours and when he came home with work pants with all those pockets with screwdrivers and things he'd sit down by the phone or the TV, and didn't want to be bothered. He was in his own world, and often with headphones listening to Yugoslavian folk music. He's crazy about Yugo music. He's recorded some tapes himself. He's a showman when he's in the right mood. But most of the time he was in his own world and if my friends called he'd hiss at them:

"Don't call here!"

I couldn't take my friends there and if they had asked for me I never found out. The phone wasn't important to me, and I had no one to speak with at home really, or, well, when there was something serious, dad was there for me. Then he could do anything for me, run downtown with his cocky style trying to settle stuff.

He had a way of walking which made people go, like "Who the fuck is that?" But he didn't care about all the normal stuff, what happened in school, in football and with friends, so I had to talk to myself or get outside. Sapko, my half-brother, lived with us during the first time, and sure I must have talked with him sometimes, he must have been seventeen then. But I don't remember much of it, and soon my dad would throw him out. They had some horrible fights. That's also a sad thing of course and it was only me and dad left. We were alone on our own sides, so to say, because the strange thing was that he didn't have any friends coming visit either. He was sitting by himself drinking. There was no company. But most of all, there was no food.

I was outdoors most of the time playing football and riding stolen bikes, and I would often come home hungry as a wolf and open the fridge thinking: Please, please, let there be something! But no, nothing, just the usual stuff: milk, butter, some bread, and if I was lucky some juice, Multivitamin, the 4 liter pack, bought at the Arabian store because they were the cheapest, and beer of course, Pripps Blå and Carlsberg, six-packs with that plastic wrap around them. Sometimes there was only beer, and my stomach was screaming for food. There was a pain in that which I'll never forget. Ask Helena! I always say that the fridge has to be jam-packed. That will never change. The other day my kid, Vincent, cried, because he didn't get his pasta, but it was already cooking on the stove. The guy was yelling because he didn't get his food quick enough so I wanted to scream: If you only knew how well your life is!

I could search every drawer, every corner, for one single macaroni or a meatball. I could fill my stomach with toast. I could eat a whole loaf of bread, or I'd run over to mom's place. I wasn't always welcomed with open arms. It was more like "Fuck, is Zlatan coming too? Doesn't Sefik feed him? And sometimes she'd yell at me: Are we made of money? Are you gonna eat us out on the street? But still, we helped each other, and at dad's place I started a little war against the beer. I poured out some of them in the sink, not all of them, that would have been too obvious, but a few.

He rarely noticed anything. There was beer everywhere, on the tables, in the shelves, and often I'd collect the empty cans in big black plastic trash bags and went to recycle them. I'd get 50 öre per can. Still I'd sometimes collect 50 or 100 kronor [ed note: that's 100 or 200 cans]. That was a lot of cans and I was happy for the cash. But of course, it was a sad thing, and like all kids in a situation like that, I'd learn to read his mood. I knew exactly when I could talk to him. The day after he'd been drinking it was quite cool. Second day was worse. In some situations he could strike like lightning. Other times he was incredibly generous. Gave me five hundred kronor just like that. At that time I was collecting football pictures. You'd

get a chewing gum and three pics in a little package. Oh, oh, which guys would I get? I wondered. Maradona? I was often disappointed, especially when I only got Swedish players I didn't know anything about. But one day he came home with a whole box. It was a blast and and I tore them all open and got all kinds of cool Brazilians. Sometimes we'd watch TV together, talking. Then it was all great.

But other days he was drunk. I have some horror images in my head, and when I got older, I started facing him. I wouldn't back off, like my brother. I told him: "You're drinking to much, dad", and we'd have some insane fights, sometimes meaningless, to tell you the truth. But I wanted to prove that I could speak for myself, and then we'd have a freaking chaos at home.

But he never touched me physically, never. Well, once he lifted me two meters up in the air and dropped me in my bed, but that was because I had been mean to Sanela, his jewel. Inside he was the kindest man in the world, and I understand now that he didn't have the easiest life. "He drinks to bury his sorrow", my brother said and maybe that wasn't the whole truth. The war really affected him a lot.

The war was a strange thing. I never found out anything about it. I was being protected. Everyone really made an effort. I didn't even understand why mom and my sisters dressed in black. It was weird, like some new fashion thing. But it was our grandmother who had died in a bomb attack in Croatia and everyone mourned, everyone except me, who never found out about anything and never would care if people were Serbs or Bosnians, or whatever. But it was worst for my dad.

He came from Bijeljina in Bosnia. He used to be a mason down there, and all his family and old friends lived in the city and now suddenly hell had come there. Bijeljina was more or less raped, and it wasn't strange that he called himself a muslim again, not at all. The Serbs invaded the town and executed hundreds of muslims. I think he knew many of them, and all his family had to escape. The whole population in Bijeljina was replaced, and Serbs moved into all the empty houses, also in my dad's old house. Someone else just entered the house and took over, and I can really understand he didn't have much time for me, especially not at nights when he sat waiting for the news on TV or some phone call from down there. The war ate him, and he became obsessed with following the news. He sat alone, drinking and mourning, listening to his Yugo-music, and I tried to stay outdoors or went over to mom's place. It was a different world.

At my dad's it was only him and me. At mom's it was a circus. People coming and leaving, loud voices and doors slamming. My mom had moved five floors up on the same street, Cronmans road 5A, the floor above my aunt Hanife, or Hanna as I called her. Me, Keki and Sanela were really close. We made a pact. But there was some shit going on at mom's place too. My half-sister sank deeper and deeper into the drugs and mom would twitch every time the phone rang or someone was at the door: No, no, kind of. Haven't we had enough accidents? What now? She grew old too soon, and is rabid against all kinds of drugs. Not a long time ago, and I'm talking recently as we speak, she called me, totally freaked out:

"There are drugs in the fridge!" "My god, drugs!" I got going too. Not again, you know, so I called Keki, kind of aggressively: "What the fuck, are there drugs in mom's fridge!?" He didn't understand a thing. But then it hit us. She talked about snus [ed note: swedish chewing tobacco].

"Chill, mom, it's just snus."

"The same shit", she said.

Those years really marked her, and we should have behaved better. But we didn't know how to. We only knew the rough style. The half-sis and her drugs moved out quite soon and went to a rehab place, but always came back into the shit and eventually mom cut her off, or the other way around. I don't know the details there. Anyway, it was quite tough, but we have that tendancy in our family. We hold our grudges, we're dramatic and say: "I never wanna see you again!" stuff like that.

Anyway, I remember one time when I was visiting her and her drugs in her own little apartment. It could have been on my birthday. I think so. I had bought her some gifts, and she was acting very kind. But when I was going to the bathroom, she panicked and stopped me. "No, no", she yelled and ran in there and started moving stuff around. I knew something was wrong. There was like a secret. Lots of stuff like that happened. But like I said, they kept it away from me, and I had my own stuff, my bikes and my football, and my dreams about Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali. I wanted to be like them.

Dad had an older brother named Sabahudin in the old Yugoslavia. They called him Sapko, my older brother was named after him. Sabahudin was a boxer, a real talent. He was fighting for BK Radnicki in the city Kragujevac and became Yugoslavic Champion with his club, and a national team boxer. But in 1967, when the guy was just had gotten married, and only twenty three years old, he swam out into the Neretva river. There were some currents and stuff and I think he had a problem with his heart or his lungs. He was drawn down by the currents and drowns. You can imagine, it was quite a blow for the family, and after that my dad became sort of a fanatic. He had all the great games recorded on video and it wasn't just Sabahudin, but also Ali, Foreman and Tyson, and all the Bruce Lee- and Jackie Chan-flicks on those old tapes.

Those were the things we'd watch when we hung out in front of the telly. Swedish TV was crap. It wasn't on the map. We lived in a totally different world. I was twenty years old when I watched my first Swedish film, and I had no clue about Swedish heroes or sport guys, like Ingemar Stenmark and guys like that. But I knew Ali! What a legend! He did his own thing no matter what people said. He never apologized and that's something I'll never forget. That dude was cool. He did his thing. That was the way to be, so I copied some stuff, I'm the greatest, kind of. You needed a tough attitude in Rosengård, and if you heard some shit, the worst was being called a cunt, and then you couldn't back down.

But usually we didn't mess around. You don't take a shit in your own bed, we used to say. It was more Rosengård against everyone else. I was there watching and screaming against the racist fuckers who demonstrate on November 30th, and once, at the Malmö Festival, I saw a huge gang from Rosengård, like two hundred of them, chasing a lone guy. It didn't really look fair, honestly. But since they were guys from my neighborhood I ran along, and I don't think that guy felt too good afterwards. We were all cocky and wild. But sometimes that's not so easy.

When me and dad lived by the Stenkula School I often stayed until late at mom's, and then I had to walk home through a dark tunnel which crosses Amiral street and is across the Annelunds bridge. Once, years before, my dad had robbed and badly beaten there and gone to the hospital with a punctured lung. Although I didn't want to, I often thought about that. The more I tried to repress it, the more often it popped up in my head, and in this neighborhood there were some railroad tracks and a street. There's also a disgusting alley and some bushes and two lamp posts, one before the tunnel and one after. A part from that it was dark, and creepy vibes. That's why those lamp posts became my beacons. Between them I'd run like crazy with a pounding heart, and all the time I was thinking: I'm sure there are some creepy dudes in there, like the ones who attacked my dad, and I thought: If I run fast enough things will be alright, and I came home breathless, and surely was no Muhammad Ali.

Another time dad took me and Sanela to go swimming in Arlöv and afterwards I was at a friend's place. When I was going home it started to rain. It was pouring down and I biked like crazy and stumbled home all wet. We lived at Zenith Street then, a bit away from Rosengård, and I was very tired. I was shaking and had stomach ache. I was in so much pain. I could barely move and lay in bed all rolled up. I threw up. I had cramps. I freaked out.

Dad came in and sure, he is like he is, his fridge was empty and he drank too much. But when the shit hits the fan, there's no one like him. He called a cab and lifted me up in the only position I could be in, like a little schrimp, and carried me down to the car. I was light as a feather back then. Dad was big and powerful and totally crazy, he was like a lion again a screamed at the female cab driver:

"He's my boy, he's my everything, screw all the traffic rules, I'll pay the fines, I'll take care of the cops", and the woman, she did what he asked. She ran two red lights and came to the childrens section of Malmö Hospital. The whole situation had become an emergency, I've been told. I was getting a shot in my back, and dad had heard some shit about people getting paralyzed by things like that, and he said some aggressive stuff, I'm guessing. He would tear the city upside down if something went wrong.

But he calmed down and I was lying belly down sobbing and got that shot in my spine. We found out I had meningitis, and the nurse pulled down all the blinds and turned off all lights. It should be all dark around me and I got some meds and dad was watching by my side. Five in the morning the next day I opened my eyes and the crisis was over, and still I don't know, what caused that? Maybe I wasn't taking care of myself well enough.

I didn't exactly eat well. Physically I was small and weak at that time. Still, I must have been strong in other ways. I forgot about it and moved on and instead of sitting at home dwelling on things I went looking for kicks. I was running around all the time. There was like a fire inside me, and just like my dad, I got going for nothing: Like, who the hell are you? Those were tough years, I've realized that now. My dad was on a roller coaster, often totally absent or furiously mad: "You have to be home by this or that time." "You can't fucking do that."

If you were a guy in dad's world and got in trouble, you should stand up for yourself and be a man. Not exactly some softy shit, not "I have stomach pain today. I'm a bit sad." Nothing like that!

I learned how to bite the bullet and move on, and also, don't forget that, I learned some stuff about sacrificing yourself. When we bought a new bed for me at Ikea, dad couldn't afford the transport. It was like five hundred extra or something. So what could we do? It was simple. Dad carried the bed on his back all the way from Ikea, totally insane, mile after mile, and I walked after him with the bed headboards. Those were light, like nothing, Still I couldn't keep up with him: "Take it easy, dad, stop."

But he just walked on. He had that macho style, and sometimes he'd turn up in school at parents meetings with his cowboy thing going on. Everyone wondered: Who is that? People noticed him. He got respect, and the teachers probably didn't dare complaining about me as much as they had planned. Kinda like, we have to be careful with that guy!

People have asked me: What would I be doing if I hadn't become a football player? I have no idea. But maybe I would have become a criminal. There were a lot of crimes at that time. Not like we were going out just to steal or rob. But some shit still happened, not just bikes. It was in and out of department stores also, and I often got a kick out of that. The thefts triggered me, and I should be so happy my dad never found out. He was drinking, sure, but there were still rules. You should do the right thing. And definitely not steal things, not a chance. Then he'd be pulling down the sky, sort of.

But the time we were caught at Wessels department store wearing our winter jackets I was lucky. We had taken stuff worth one thousand four hundred kronor. It wasn't the ordinary stealing candy thing. But my friend's dad had to come pick us up, and when the letter arrived at home, Zlatan Ibrahimovic has been arrested for theft, bla bla bla, I could tear it up before dad got to see it. I was lucky and I continued stealing, so okay, it could have ended badly.

But I can say one thing for sure, it wouldn't have had anything to do with drugs. I was obviously totally against them. I didn't just pour out dad's beer. I threw away mom's cigarettes. I hated all drugs and poisons and I was seventeen or eighteen when I got drunk the first time and threw up in some stairs like any other teenager, and after that I haven't gotten drunk many times, only one collapse in a bathtub after the first scudetto with Juventus. It was Trézéguet, the snake, who pushed me into drinking shots.

Me and Sanela also pushed Keki hard in Rosengård. He wasn't allowed to smoke or drink because then we'd be coming after him. It was a special thing, with my younger brother.

We took care of him. With sensitive stuff he'd go to Sanela. With tougher things he'd turn to me. I stood up for him. I took responsibility. But a part from that I wasn't exactly being a saint, and I haven't always been too kind to friends and teammates. I did some aggressive things, the kind of shit that would make me go insane today if someone did it to Maxi and Vincent. But there's a fact we can't forget. I was double already back then.

I was disciplined and wild, and I was figuring out philosophies about that. My thing was that I would both talk and perform. So, not just talking: I'm the best, who the fuck are you? Of course not, there's nothing more childish, but not either performing or saying chicken shit like the Swedish stars. I wanted to become the best while being cocky. Not that I thought I'd become a superstar or anything like that. Jesus, I came from Rosengård! But maybe those things made me a bit different.

I was trouble. I was crazy. But I had character. I wasn't always in time to school. I had problems getting up in the mornings, I still do, but I did my homework, at least sometimes. Math was the easiest. Bam, bam, bam and I saw the solution. It was a bit like on the football field. Images and solutions just came to me like lightning. But I sucked at writing down the solutions so the teacher thought I cheated. I wasn't exactly the guy you'd expect doing well in school. I was more like the guy you kick out of school. Still, I really studied. I read everything before the tests, and forgot everything the day after. I wasn't really a bad boy. I just had trouble sitting still, and I threw some rubbers and stuff like that. I had ants in my pants.

Those were turbulent years. We moved all the time, I don't really know why. But we rarely lived in one place for more than a year, and the teachers used that. You have to switch to a school near your home, they said, not because rules mattered much to them, but because they saw a chance of getting rid of me. I went to different schools all the time and had problems getting friends, and dad had was on call on his caretaker job and had his war and his drinking, and the worst thing was the tinnitus in his ears. It would be ringing in his head, and I was taking care of myself more and more, trying not to care about the chaos in my family. There was always some shit.

You know, we from the Balkan are tough. My sister and her drugs had cut off contact with mom and us, and maybe that was to expect after all the fights with the drugs and rehab centers. But also my other half-sister was struck out from our family. Mom just erased her, and then I barely knew why. It was some crap about a boyfriend, a guy from Yugoslavia. Him and my sister had a fight and mom took his side for some reason, and then my sister freaked out and she and mom yelled some terrible shit at each other, and of course that wasn't good. But still, it shouldn't have been like the end of the world.

It wasn't like it was the first time we were fighting in my family. But mom was proud, and I guess she and my sister got some kind of lock up. I recognize that. I don't forget things either. I remember a bad tackle for years. I remember shit that has been done to me, and I can hold grudges for a long time. But this time things went too far.

We had been five siblings at mom's place, and suddenly we were only three; me, Sanela and Aleksandar, and things couldn't be repaired. They were like written in stone. The half-sis no longer belonged to us, and years went by. She was gone. But fifteen years later her son called our mom. My half-sister had a son, a grandson to mom in other words.

"Hi granny", he said, but mom didn't want to have anything to do with him.

"I'm sorry", she said and hung up.

I couldn't believe it when I heard. I felt very bad. I can't describe the feeling. I wanted to disappear. You don't act like that! Never, ever! But there is a lot of pride in my family that fucks things up for us, and I'm happy I had the football.

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At dad's place in Rosengård, years later



### CHAPTER 3

In Rosengård we had different areas (enclosures), and no area was better or worse than the other, well the one that was called the Gipsy area had a low status. But it wasn't like all the Albanians or Turks hanged around at one place. It was the area that counted, not the country your parents where from. But you had to stay at your own area, and the area where my mom had her house was called Törnrosen. It had a swing, a playing ground, a flag pole and a football court where we played every day. Sometimes they didn't let me play. I was to little. Then I flipped out in an instant.

I hated to be left outside. I hated to lose. But still, the most important thing wasn't winning. It was the tricks and the awesome stuff. There was a lot of "wow! Look at that!". You could impress the guys with tricks and flicks, and you had to practice until you were the best, and often the mom's yelled from the windows: "It's late. The food is ready. Come inside."

"Soon, soon", we said and continued playing, and it could get late and start raining and general chaos. But we continued playing. We never got tired and it was close spaces. You had to be quick in both head and feet, especially for me since I was little and weak and could easily be get tackled, and I learned cool stuff all the time. I had to. Or else I wouldn't get any "wow's", nothing that triggered me, and often I slept with the ball and thought of new tricks I would do the next day. It was like a movie that kept on going.

My first club was MBI, Malmö Boll och idrottsförening. I was six years when I started there. Vi played on gravel behind a couple of green barracks, and I biked to the training on stolen bikes and wasn't always that well behaved I guess. The coaches sent me home a couple of times, and I screamed and swore at

them, and I heard all the time: "Pass the ball, Zlatan!". It pissed me off, and I felt awkward. In MBI you had both foreigners and Swedes, and a lot of parents whined about my tricks from the block. I told them to go to hell and changed club several times and came to FBK Balkan, and that was something else!

In MBI the Swedish dads stood and yelled: "Come on, guys. Good work!"

In Balkan it was more: "I will fuck you mother up the ass". They were crazy Yugoslavs who smoked a lot and threw shoes around them and I thought: Wonderful, exactly like home. I belong here! The coach was a Bosnian. He had played on a high level down there in Yugoslavia, and he became some kind of a dad to us. He drove us home sometimes, and could give me a couple of Kronor to buy ice cream or sometime to straighten up my hunger.

I was a goalie for a while. I don't know why really. Maybe I had flipped out on the old goalie and said something like: "You suck, I can do this better myself". It was probably something like that. But one game I let in a lot of goals, and then I became furious. I screamed that everyone was shit. That football was shit. That the whole world was shit, and that I would start playing hockey instead:

"Hockey is a lot better, you fucking idiots! I will become a hockey pro! Go drown yourselves!"

It was just that: I looked hockey up, and damn, all the stuff you needed! You had to have money. The only thing I could do was to continue with that shit sport called Football. But I stopped being a goalie and went up to the attack, and became kind of good.

One day we were going to play a game. I wasn't there and everybody was screaming: "Where's Zlatan? Where's Zlatan?" There was only one minute to the start, and the coach and my team mates probably wanted to kill me: "Where is he? How the fuck can he be absent from an important game like this?" But then they saw a crazy guy that biked like a idiot on a stolen bike and was riding straight towards the coach. Was that mad man going to run him over? No, just in front of the old man I stood on the brakes and ran into the field, and I guess that the coach went mad.

He got sand in his eyes. He got splashed. But he let me play, and I guess we won. We were a good gang. One time I was punished for some other shit, and had to sit on the bench in the first half. We were down 4-0 against a snob team, Vellinge, it was us the immigrants against the good boys, there was a lot of aggression in the air and I was so pissed off that I was about to explode. How could that idiot put me on the bench?

"Are you stupid?" I asked the coach.

"Easy, easy, you'll get to play soon"

He let me play in the second half and I scored eight goals. We won with eight-five and mocked the snobs and sure, I was good. I was technical and saw openings in the game all the time and at block were my mom lived I had become a little champion when it came to doing the unexpected stuff on narrow spaces. But I'm still tired of all the Donald Duck characters that go around and say: I immediately saw that Zlatan would become something extra, bla bla bla. It's like they breast fed me.

He was my best friend. That's just bullshit.

Nobody saw anything. At least, not as much as they said they did afterwards. No big clubs were knocking at my door. I was a punk ass little kid. It wasn't all: "Ohh, we must be nice to that talented little boy!" It was more: "Who let the immigrant in"? And already back then it was a lot of ups and downs. I could score eight goals in one game, just to be really bad in the next.

I hanged around with a guy called Tony Flygare. We had the same home language teacher. His parents are also from Balkan and we was something of a tough guy also. He didn't live in Rosengård, he live just outside at Vitemöllegatan. We were born the same year, he was born in January and I in October, and that probably meant something. He was bigger and stronger and was seen as the bigger talent. It was a lot of Tony: "Look at him, what a player" and I stood in his shadow. Maybe it was good, what do I know. I had to be the underdog. But like I said, at the time I wasn't a big talent. I was a savage, a maniac, and I really didn't get control over my temper. I continued to yell at players and referees and I changed clubs all the time. I played in Balkan. I came back to MBI and then again Balkan and then to BK Flagg. It was a mess and no one took me to training, so to speak, and sometimes I look at the parents standing there.

My dad was never there, not amongst the Yugoslavs nor the Swedes, and I really don't know what I thought. That was just the way it was. I didn't need anyone. I had gotten used to that. But still, it pained me. I don't know. You get used to your life, and I kept that on a distance. Dad was dad. He was hopeless. He was fantastic. He was up and down. I didn't count on him, not like other kids counted on their parents. But still, I guess I had some hope for him. Damn, imagine if he had seen that awesome stuff, that Brazilian thing? Dad had his moments when he was extremely involved. He wanted me to become a lawyer.

I can't say that I believed in it. In my circles you didn't become a lawyer. You did crazy stuff and dreamt of becoming the tough guy, and we really didn't have any support from the parents either, it wasn't all: "Should I explain the Swedish story for you?" It was all Yugoslavian music and beer cans and empty fridges and the Balkan war. But sometimes, you know, he took his time and talked about football with me and it made me happy every time. I mean, he was dad one day, and one day he said, I don't forget it, there was something ceremonial in the air:

"Zlatan, it's time for you to start playing in a big club"

"What do you mean big club?"

"A good team, Zlatan. Like Malmö FF".

I don't think I really understood. What was so special with Malmö FF? I didn't know anything about stuff like that. But I knew about the club. I had played against them with Balkan, and thought: Why not? If my dad says so. But I didn't know where the stadium was, or anything else in the city for that matter. Malmö where close. But it was another world. I reached the age of seventeen before I went to the city central, and I didn't understand anything about the life there. But I learned the road to the training, and it took me thirty minutes to bike there with my clothes in a plastic bag, and of course, I was nervous. In Malmö FF it was serious. It wasn't the usual: Come and play, kid! Here you had to go on trial and take a place and I noticed at once, I wasn't like the others, and I prepared myself to pack my stuff and go home. But on the second day, coach Nils told me:

"You're welcome to the team"

"You really mean that?"

I was thirteen back then, and there was a couple of foreigners there already, Tony was amongst them. Other than that there were only Swedes, somewhere Limhamn's types, high class kids. I felt like I was from Mars. Not only because dad didn't have a big villa and never came to my games. I talked differently. I dribbled. I exploded like a bomb, and I fought on the pitch. One time I got a yellow card for yelling at my team mates.

"You can't do that!" the ref said.

"You can also go fuck yourself", I shouted and was shown the red card.

The Swedes started to talk. Their parents wanted my out of there, and I thought for the thousand time: I don't give a fuck about them. I'll change team again. Or I venture with tae kwo do instead. That's cooler. Football is shit. Some idiot dad in the team had a list. Zlatan must be kicked out of the team, it said, and all types of people signed that list. They talked about it all the time: Zlatan doesn't belong here. We have to throw him out! Sign it, bla bla.

It was insane. Alright, I had been in a fight with that dad's son. He had given me a lot of dirty tackles and I exploded. I head butted him, honestly. But I really regretted it afterwards. I took the bike to the hospital and apologized. It was a idiotic thing to do, really, but a list? Get out of here! The coach, Åke Kallenberg, just looked at that list:

"What is this shit?"

He tore it apart. He was good, Åke. Or I don't know about good! He benched me for almost a year in the junior team, and like everyone else he thought that I dribbled too much and yelled too much on my team mates and had the wrong attitude and approach and all that. I learned something important during those years. If a guy like me is to be respected he had to be five times better than Leffe Persson (Swedish name) and all those other names. He had to train ten times harder. Or else he wouldn't stand a chance. No way. Especially not if he's a bike thief.

Obviously I should have conducted myself better after all that stuff. I probably wanted to. I wasn't totally hopeless. But the training ground was very far away, seven kilometres, and I often went there by walking. But sometimes the temptation was too big, especially if I saw a nice bike. One time I had my eyes on a yellow bike with a couple of cool boxes, and suddenly I understood, it was a postal bike. I biked around with the neighbourhood's letters, and then I jumped off and put the bike in a corner. I didn't want to steal people's post as well.

One time the bike that I had stolen was stolen from me and I stood there outside the arena and it was a long way home and I was hungry and impatient, so I took a new bike outside the dressing rooms. I broke the lock as usual, and I liked it as I remember. It was a good bike and I was careful to park it far away so that the old owner wouldn't run into it. But three days later we were called to a meeting. Already back then, I had a hang up on stuff like that. Meetings usually mean trouble and preaching and I immediately started to come up with smart excuses:

Like, it wasn't me. It was my brother, and sure enough: the meeting was about the assistant coach's bike. "Has anyone seen it?"

No one had seen it. Neither had I! I mean, in a situation like that, you don't say a thing. That's how it works. You play stupid: Ohh, I'm sorry, poor you, I got my bike stolen once too.

But still, I felt bad. What have I done? And so unlucky! It was the assistant coach's bike. You're supposed to respect the coaches. I knew that.

Or I should say, I thought that one should listen to them and learn their stuff, zonal play, tactics and all that. But at the same time not listen. Like still continue with the dribbling and the tricks. Listen, don't listen! That was my philosophy. But to steal their bikes? I didn't think that was included in the concept. I was worried and went to the assistant coach.

"You know, it's like this", I said. "I have borrowed your bike a bit. It was a crisis situation. A onetime thing! You'll get it back tomorrow".

I put on the biggest smile, and I think it helped me in some way. My smile helped me a lot those years and I could come up with a joke when I needed it the most. But it wasn't easy. I wasn't only the black sheep. If something disappeared, I got blamed. It was of course the correct thing to do. I was the poor guy. When the others had the best football shoes from the beginning with kangaroo skin, I bought my first shoes from "Ekohallen" for fifth nine kronor (six euro), it was a couple of shoes that were placed next to the tomatoes and vegetables, and so it continued. I never had anything flashy when it came down to stuff like that.

When the team went abroad a lot of the other kids had two thousand kronor (200 euro) with them. I had like twenty kronor, and still sometimes my dad didn't pay the rent to be able to send me with the team. He rather got evicted than let me stay at home. It was a beautiful thing to do. But I couldn't really match my friends.

"Come Zlatan, let's eat pizza, a hamburger, and let's go buy this and that."

"Nahh, later. I'm not hungry! I'll chill here instead".

I tried to get away but still be cool. That didn't work too well. It wasn't a big thing. But it was something new and went into an unsecure time. Not that I wanted to be like everyone else. Maybe a little! I wanted to learn their stuff, like etiquette and such things. But mostly I did my own thing; that was my weapon, so to speak. I saw the mates from my type of ghettos who tried to play high class. It always failed as much as they tried, and I thought, I'll do the opposite, I do my thing even harder. Instead of saying: "I have only 20 kronor", I said: "I have nothing, not a dime." That was much cooler. More crazy. I was a tough guy from Rosengård. I was different. It became my identity, and I enjoyed it more and more and didn't ever care that I didn't know a thing about the Swede's idols.

Sometimes we were ball boys when the senior team played, and once Malmö FF had a game against IFK Göteborg, a big game, and my team mates became wild and wanted autographs from the stars, especially from someone named Thomas Ravelli, and apparently were some big hero after some penalty kick in the World Cup. I had never heard of him, not that I said anything about it. I didn't want to make a fool out of myself, and of course, I had also seen the WC. But, I was from Rosengård. I didn't give a damn about the Swedes. I rooted for the Brazilians, for Romario and Bebeto and the gang, and the only thing that interested me with that Ravelli was his shorts. I ponder about where to stole a pair.

We were supposed to sell Binglotto (some sort of Swedish lottery tickets) to bring in money to the club, and I had no idea what those lottery tickets were for. I had never heard of Locket (the anchor guy). But I tried to sell the tickets.

"Hello, hello, my name is Zlatan. Sorry to disturb. Do you want a lottery ticket?"

It didn't go to well, seriously. I sold one and even less of the Christmas calendars we were supposed to sell. Zero that is, and eventually my dad had to buy everything. It wasn't fair. We didn't have the economy and weren't really in the need of having more junk at home. It was stupid, and I don't understand how they can send kids to do such beggar stuff.

We played football and we were an awesome vintage. It was Tony Flygare, Gudmundur Mete, Matias Concha, Jimmy Tamandi, Markus Rosenberg. It was me. It was all kinds of great guys, and I got better and better, but the whining continued. It was mostly the parents. They didn't give in. "Here he goes again", they said. "Here he dribbles again!" "He's not right for the team!" It pissed me off. Who the fuck were they to stand there and judge me? There has been a lot about me wanting to stop playing football back then. That's not true. But I really thought of changing teams for a while. I didn't have a dad close by who could defend me or buy me the most expensive clothes. I had to make it on my own, and everywhere the Swedish dads and their snobby sons explained why I was wrong. Of course I got mad! Furthermore I was restless. I wanted action, action. I needed something new.

Johnny Gyllensjö, the junior team coach, heard about it and talked to the club. "Come one", he said. "Everyone can't be pretty boys. We're losing a great talent here!" My dad signed a junior contract for me. I got fifteen hundred a month and that was a kick of course, and I worked harder and harder. Like I said, I wasn't impossible to work with. It wasn't only, don't listen! It was also listen.

I trained hard at getting the ball with as few touches as possible. But I didn't shine all that much, I have to say. It was still mostly Tony, and I sucked in as much knowledge as possible to become at least as good as him. My whole generation in MFF like the Brazilian stuff and tricks. We triggered each other. It was kind of like on my mom's block again, and when we had computers we downloaded different tricks, stuff Ronaldo and Romario did, and then we practiced the tricks until we got it right. We were used to touching the ball. But the Brazilians pushed it with the foot and we practiced again and again until we had it right and eventually we tried it at the games. There were a lot of us who did that kind of stuff. But I took it one step further. I went deeper. I was more accurate with the details. I became obsessed, honestly. Those tricks had always been my way of showing myself, and I dribbled on, didn't matter how much the parents and coaches moaned about it. No, I didn't adapt. Or rather, I did both. I wanted to be different. I wanted to know the coach's stuff to, that went better and better. But it wasn't always easy. Sometimes it pained me, and I probably was affected by the situation at my mom and dad. It was a lot of shit that needed to come out.

In Sorgenfri School they gave me an extra teacher. I got really pissed off. Sure, I was messy. Maybe the worst of them all. But an extra teacher! Get out of here. I had good grades in subjects like English, chemistry, and physics. I wasn't a junkie kid. I hadn't even smoked a cigarette. I just did some stupid stuff. But there was talk about putting me in a special School. They wanted to brand me, and I felt like a UFO. It started ticking like a bomb in my body. Do I need to say that I was good in gym class? Maybe I was a bit unfocused in the class room and had a hard time sitting still with books. But I could also concentrate, if we're talking about hitting away a ball or an egg.

One day in gym class. That special teacher was there to watch me. And every little thing I did, she was on me, like a patch. Then I got pissed off. I hit the ball right in her head. She was shocked and just looked at me, and afterwards they called my dad and wanted to talk about psychiatric help and special School and all that shit, and you know, it wasn't an easy thing to discuss with my dad. No one talks badly about his children, especially not a stalking teacher. He got mad, went straight to school with his cowboy style: "Who the fuck are you? To come here and talk about psychiatric help? You all need help. But there's nothing wrong with my son, he's a good kid, you all can go fuck yourselves!"

He was a crazy Yugoslav in his prime and sometime later that teacher stopped. I got my confidence back. But still, the whole thing! A special teacher just for me! It made me mad. Sure, I maybe wasn't some hall monitor. But you can't divide kids into groups like that. You can't!

If someone today would treat Maxi and Vincent like they were different, I'd get really pissed off. I promise. I'd make a bigger scene than my dad. That special treatment is still in me. It made me feel bad. Alright, in the long run it may have made me stronger. What do I know? I became even more of a warrior. But in the short run it messed me up.

You know, one day I was going to have a date with a girl, and I wasn't so confident when it came to girls back then. The guy with the extra teacher, how cool did that sound? Just to ask for her number made me all sweaty! She was an awesome girl in my eyes, and I managed to say:

"You want to do something after school?"

"Sure, absolutely", she said.

"What about Gustav?"

Gustav Adolf was a square in Malmö City, and I felt that she liked the idea. But when I arrived she wasn't there. I got all nervous. I wasn't in my own neighbourhood and felt insecure. Why didn't she come? Didn't she like me anymore? One minute passed, two, three, ten minutes, and eventually I couldn't stand it anymore. It was the worst humiliation. She fooled me, I thought. Who would want a date with me? So I got went home. I don't give a damn about her. I'm going to be a football star. It was the most stupid thing. The girl's bus was just late. The driver wanted to have a cigarette or something, and she came just after I left and was as sad as me.

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## CHAPTER 4

I started high school in Borgar-school that has a special football alignment, and I had great expectations. Now everything would change! Now I would become really cool. But everything was like a chock. Ok, I was prepared.

I had some snob boys in the team. But now there were also girls and others types of guys, cool guys who stood in the corners with nice clothes and smoked. Where I came from you had sport shoes and trainings overalls with big Adidas- or Nike marks. It was the coolest thing, one thought, and I always walked around like that. What I didn't know was that Rosengård was branded in my forehead. It was like a sign. As if that extra teacher was still stalking me.

In Borgar School they had Ralph Lauren shirts, Timberland shoes and shirts! Just that! I had barely seen a guy in a shirt before, and I realized that I had to do something about the situation. There were a lot of really hot girls in school. You couldn't talk to them looking like a ghetto kid. I talked with my dad about it and we got into a fight. We got study benefits (ed not: during the 3 years in high school, every kid in Sweden gets an certain amount of money each month) from the government. The amount was 795 kr each month and for dad it was natural that he should get the money since he paid for everything, like he said. I put it differently:

"You know that I can't be the biggest geek in school!"

In some way he bought the argument. I got the study benefit and a bank account. The money came the 20th every month and a lot of my mate's stood there by the cash dispenser 23.59 the day before and waited for the money, all hyped: will it every turn into midnight? Ten, nine, eight... I was a bit cooler. But in the morning I had definitely gotten some of the money and bought a pair of Davis Jeans.

Those were the cheapest. Or sometimes I bought some shirts, three for the price of one. I tried different styles. Nothing worked. I still had Rosengård branded in my forehead. I didn't fit in. That's how I felt. I had been a little guy all my life. But that summer I grew thirteen CM in just a couple of months and I guess



that I looked kind of rickety. I needed to assert myself, and for the first time in my life I started hanging in the city centre, at Burger King, and at the squares.

I did some worse stuff to, not only for the kick. I needed cool stuff. Or else I wouldn't stand a chance in the school yard. I stole a guys MP3. We had lockers outside the class rooms with small locks with codes and a friend told me the secret code of one guys. When he wasn't there I took his minidisc and biked away with it and listened to his songs and felt kind of cool. But it wasn't enough. I still didn't have much to come with. I was still the ghetto kid. My friend was smarter. He got himself a girl from a nice family and became friends with her brother and started borrowing his clothes. A good trick, absolutely, even though it didn't worked all the way. We from ghettos never fitted in. We were different. But still, my friend walked around with the most expensive clothes and had a cool girl and was all cocky. I had my football.

But that didn't go to well either. I had broken into the junior team and played with guys who were one year older than me, and that's an achievement itself. We were a fantastic gang, one of the better teams in the country in our age group. But I was sitting on the bench. It was Åke Kallenberg's decision. A coach should obviously be able to bench anyone he wants. But I don't think that it only had to do with football. When I came in, I usually scored. I wasn't bad. But I was wrong in other ways, they thought.

It was said that I didn't contribute enough to the team. "Your dribbling doesn't bring the game forward!" I heard that type of stuff a hundred times, and I felt the vibes: That Zlatan! Isn't he unbalanced? It wasn't lists anymore, but not far away from it, and its true; I yelled at my team mates. I screamed and talked to much on the pitch. I could get into fights with spectators. Not that it was any serious stuff. But I had my temper and my playing stype. I was a different type of player and I got mad. I didn't really belong in MFF. Many people looked at it like that. I remember junior-SM (ed note: SM = Swedish championship). We qualified for the knock out rounds, and it was obviously a big thing.

But Åke Kallenberg didn't pick me for the team. I didn't even get to sit on the bench. "Zlatan is injured", he said in front of everyone and it made me jump up. What does he mean? I told him:

"What are you talking about? How can you say something like that?"

"You're injured", he repeated, and I couldn't believe it. Why did he come with shit like this when we were going to play a championship?

"You're only saying that because you don't want me to come along and play."

But no, he felt that I was injured and it made me mad. There was something strange in the air. No one told me like it was. No one were man enough and that year Malmö FF won the junior-SM without me and that didn't really made me more confident. Sure, I had said a lot of cocky stuff. Like when my Italian teacher threw me out from the class room, and I answered: "I don't give a fuck about you. I'll eventually learn the language when I become a football pro in Italy", and that sounds kind of funny in hindsight. Back then it was all talk. I didn't believe in it. How could I, when I wasn't even a starter in the junior team?

At this time the senior team had problems. Malmö FF's senior team is like the nicest team in the country. When the old man came to Sweden back in the 70s the club totally dominated. They even reached the final of Champions League, or European Cup as it was called back then, and none of the juniors was brought in. The management recruited from other top clubs instead. But this year the situation was changed. Without anyone knowing why, the club failed. MFF always was at the top, but was almost being relegated now. They played really bad. The economy was worthless. They didn't have any money to buy any players and more young guys from the junior teams got the chance, and you can imagine how we juniors talked about it! Who will get the next change? Him or him?

It was Tony Flygare, obviously, and the Gudmundur Mete and Jimmy Tamandy. They didn't even think of me. I was the last one in the team that was going to be brought in. I believed that. Most people believed that. So honestly, there was nothing to hope for. Even the junior team coaches benched me. Why would the senior team want me then? No way! Still, I wasn't worse than Tony, Mete and Jimmy. I had shown that in the little playing time that I got. What was the problem? What are they doing? All that was itching in me, and I became even more confident that it was some sort of politics behind it all.

As a kid it may have been cool to be different and cockier than the rest, but in the long run it held me back. When it really counts you don't want some wild headed immigrant doing his Brazilian stuff all the time. Malmö FF was the most proud and nicest club. During their prime every player had been blonde and well behaved and they always said good, nice things, and from that time they hadn't brought in so many guys with foreign background. Ok, Yksel Osmanovski had played there. He was also from Rosengård. He was a pro in Bari back then. But he was a good guy. No, no, there wasn't going to be any senior team for me. I had my junior contract. I was going to have to be happy with that, and with U20. U20 was something they had created in relation to the special football alignment in Borgar School (ed note: he's not talking about Swedish U20). The junior team was up to eighteen. In the U20 there was a twenty years old limit.

There wasn't so many of us who were brought up there yet, not enough to make a team yet. But the intention was to stop us from leaving the team, and often we played with the guys from the reserve team and played against division three-teams. It wasn't anything special, but I had the chance to shine there.

Sometimes we trained with the senior team, and then I refused to adapt. Normally a junior doesn't bring the most complicated dribbling in moments like this. He's supposed to be a good boy. But I thought: Why not? I have nothing to lose. I gave it all, and of course, I noticed that they were talking about me. "Who does he think he is?" and stuff like that, and I mumbled: "Go fuck yourselves!" and just continued. I dribbled, I played the tough guy, and sometimes the senior team coach, Roland Andersson, was watching.

In the beginning I had all kinds of expectations: Does he think I'm any good? But that changed with all the shit that was happening around me. When I saw him one day alongside the pitch, I thought: Someone has probably whined to him! Some complaint. At that time I felt more and more disappointed with football, and didn't have any success in other areas either, especially not in school. I was still shy and insecure and often I only ate in school. I ate like a mad man. But the rest I didn't care about. I studied less, and eventually I dropped out completely from high school, and at home it was all kinds of problems.

It was like a mine field, and I tried to stay away from it and did my tricks on block. In my room I had pictures of Ronaldo. Ronaldo was the man. Not only for the step over's and the goals in WC. Ronaldo was great on all levels. He was someone I wanted to become. A guy who made the difference. The Swedish national team players, what was that? There was no superstar there, no one there that the world talked about. Ronaldo was my hero and I studied him on the net and tried to understand his moving pattern, and I thought that I becoming really good. I danced with the ball.

But what did that give me? Nothing, I believed. It was an unfair world. Guys like me didn't stand a chance, and I wouldn't become a star no matter what qualities I had. That was the situation. I was fucked. I was wrong, and I tried to find other ways. But I didn't care enough to go all the way. I just kept on playing. That day when Roland Andersson stood there watching I was playing with the Malmö U20 on pitch one. Pitch one does no longer exist. But it was a grass pitch, just outside Malmö Stadium, and afterwards I got to hear that Roland Andersson wanted to talk to me. I knew that. I panicked, and honestly I started thinking: Have I stolen a bike? Have I head butted anyone? I went through every stupid thing I've done and it was a lot of things probably. But I didn't understand how it had reached him, and I was thinking of thousands excuses. Roland loud guy with a deep voice. He's cool, but very strict. He dominates the room, and I think my heart started pounding a little bit.

Roland Andersson, I had heard that he had played in WC in Argentina. He was not only one of the old MFF stars back from the great times. He was also a former national team player. A guy with respect, and he was sitting at his desk, and wasn't smiling. He looked serious, like, here comes the telling off.

"Hey, Roland. What's up? You wanted something, or?"

I always tried to be a little cocky like that. It was a thing since my childhood. You couldn't show weakness.

"Sit down."

"Alright, take it easy. No one has died. I promise."

"Zlatan, it's time for you to stop playing with the little shits."

With the little shits? What is he talking about, I was thinking, and what have I done to the little kids?

"Why is that", I said. "Are you talking about someone in particular?"

"It's time for you to start playing with the big boys."

I still didn't get it.

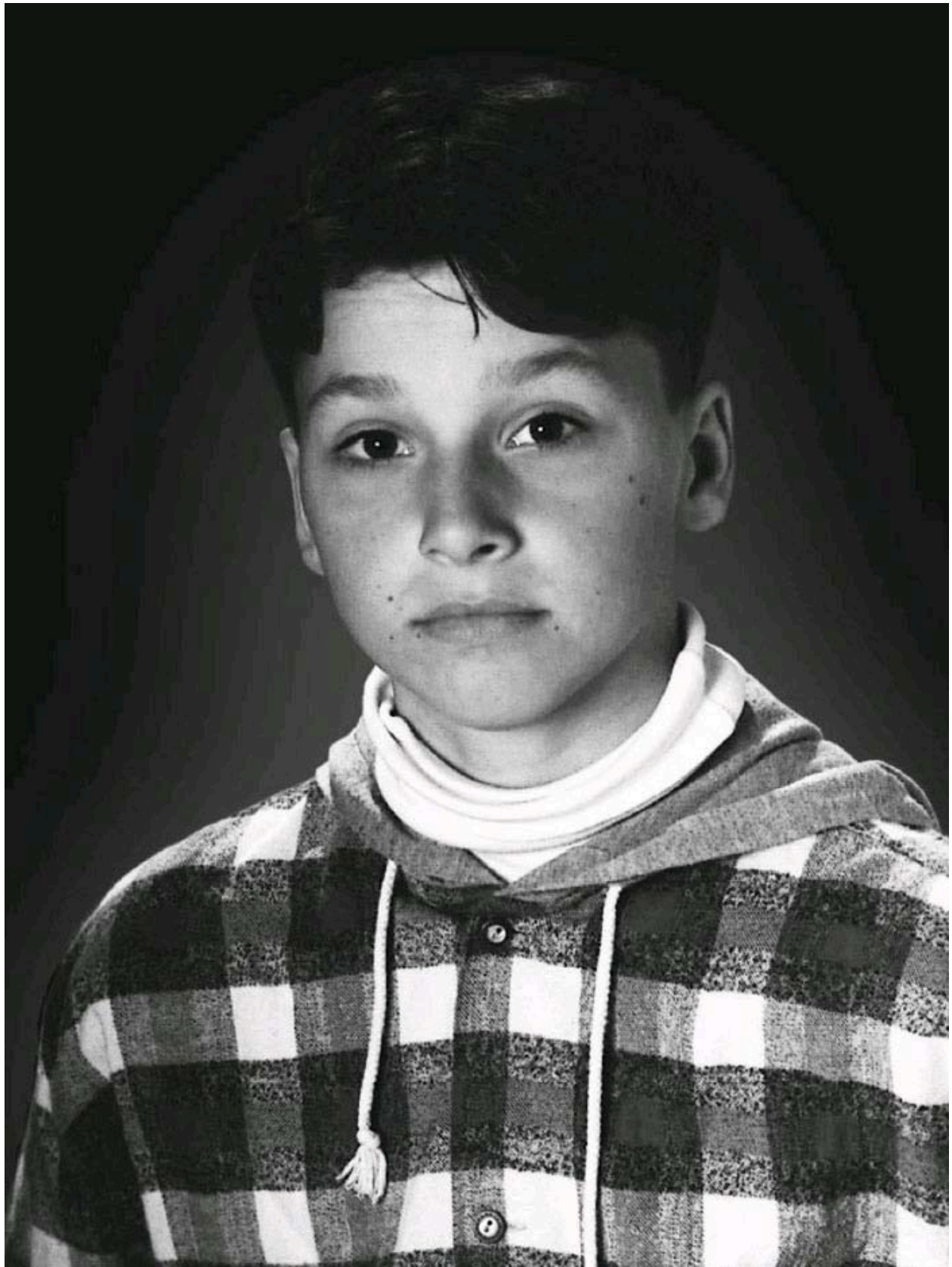
"What?"

"You're welcome to the senior team, kid", he continued, and honestly, I can't describe, never ever.

It was like I had been risen ten meters up the air, and I guess that I went out and stole a new bike and felt like the coolest guy in town.

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## CHAPTER 5

In Malmö we had this thing called Milen (ed note: directly translated it means "The Mile". But it's a distance of ten kilometres). Milen was a damn long stretch. We ran from our stadium to the Water-tower, down through Limhamn's road, past all the really expensive houses with great views over the ocean, I remember one house in particular, it was pink and really awesome and we thought like: Wow, who are these people that are living here? It's sick how much money they have.

We continued towards Kungsparken, in under a tunnel, and to Borgar School, it was the perfect moment for all the girls and snob's to see me. I got such a kick out of it! It was my revenge. Here am I, the geek from Rosengård who barely had the guts to talk to a girl, and now I was running with the tough guys in MFF, like Mats Lilienberg and them. It was really awesome and I put it into system. In the beginning I ran fast. I was the new kid in the senior team and wanted to show what I could do. But then I understood the important thing: the most important thing was to impress the chicks.

That's why me, Tony and Mete did a lot of smart tricks. We ran the first four kilometres. But at Linhamn's road we quietly got away at the bus stop. No one saw us. We had been last in line and could easily go for the bus and get on it. Of course we laughed like maniacs. What a bold thing to do! But we had to duck when we drove past the other guys in the team. I mean, the bus thing didn't really show the best attitude! At the end of that long road we jumped of the bus, well rested and far ahead of the other guys, and hid in the corner. When the team ran past us we started running as hell to the front of the line and had the chance to show off in front of the school. The girls probably thought, wow, those guys are really strong.

Another day on Milen I said to Tony and Mete: "This is ridiculous. Let's steal a bike instead." I think they were a bit hesitant to the idea. They didn't have my experience. But I talked them into it and then I stole a bike and biked away with both of them on the package holder. Other times it really got out of hands. I wasn't the most mature guy in town, you know, and Tony was also an idiot. That fool had started with porno movies. He rented a flick and bought chocolate instead of running, and we sat and ate that chocolate while the other guys were running Milen.

I guess I have to be happy that Roland Andersson accepted our excuses. Or he didn't. He was cool. He got us young kids. But of course, he talked other times: What's with this guy, Zlatan? What doesn't he show any humility? And I heard the usual old talk: He dribbles too much. He doesn't think of the team. Some of it was correct. Absolutely! I had a lot to learn. But some of it was jealousy. The players felt the competition, and I wasn't only a cheat. I worked really hard, and the training with the team wasn't enough. I played at my mom's block as well, hour after hour. I had a trick. I went out in Rosengård and told all the little kids: "You get some money if you manage to take the ball from Me." and it wasn't only a game. It gave me my technique. It thought me to protect the ball with my body.

When I wasn't playing outside with the little kids I was playing video games. I could go on for ten hours in sitting, and often I saw solutions in the game that I used in real life. It was football around the clock, I guess. But during the trainings in MFF it wasn't easy, and maybe I played around a little bit too much. It was like they have gotten something irrational into the team that they didn't understand. I mean every bastard pass in this or that situation and say this or that in some other situation. But I... I came from another planet. I just did my crazy Rosengård thing. In the beginning it was mostly the older guys against the younger ones. We, the young guys were supposed to carry all the shit and be available all the time. It was ridiculous, and the atmosphere was awful right from the beginning. I the beginning of the season Tommy Söderberg, the national team coach, had predicted that Malmö FF would win the league, but from that time everything went wrong, and there was a risk for relegation to division two. It was the first time for like sixty years, and the fans were angry and worried and all the older guys in the team had the world's biggest pressure on their shoulders. They knew that what it would mean to the city if they didn't manage to stay in Allsvenskan (ed note: Swedish first league), a catastrophe, nothing else. It wasn't like time for party and all the Brazilian stuff. But I was really happy about being called up to the first team and wanted to show who I am. Maybe it wasn't the right time.

But I had it in my blood. I was a new member of the gang. I wanted people to 'get it' and refused to back down. When Jonnie Fedel, the goalkeeper, as early as the first day sputtered "where the fuck is the balls"

it made me flinch, especially when I saw that everybody was looking at me and expected that I was supposed to get those balls. But no way in life, not when he was talking like that.

"If you want them, you have to go get them yourself!" I sputtered, and that wasn't the usual way to respond in MFF.

It was the ghetto thing again, and it wasn't popular. But I had support from Ronald and the assistant coach Thomas Sjöberg, I felt that, even though they mostly believed in Tony of course. He got playing time and scored in his debut. I sat on the bench and tried to work even harder. But it didn't help, and I swore. Maybe I should have been satisfied and not be in such a hurry. But I don't work like that. I want to get the chance and show what I got immediately. But it didn't look good, and on the nineteenth of September 1999 we were facing Halmstad on their home pitch Öljans Vall.

It was a deciding game. If we won or got a draw it would mean that we would still play in Allsvenskan next year. If we didn't we had to keep on fighting in the last rounds, and everyone in the team were nervous and shaky. Our play was locked. In the beginning of the second half Niklas Gudmunsson, our forward, got injured, and I was hoping to get a chance. But no, Roland didn't even look at me, and time was running out. Nothing happened. At the time, the score was one-one and that would be enough. But when only fifteen minutes were left even our captain Hasse Mattisson got injured and soon after that Halmstad scored two-one, and I saw how the whole team turned pale.

In that situation Roland brought me in, and while everyone else had a crisis I got started with a real adrenalin rush. I had Ibrahimovic on my shirt. It was wow, it was big, like no one can stop me now, and immediately I had a shot that touched the bar and went over. But then something happened. We got a penalty kick in the dying minutes, and you can understand. It was a feeling of life and death. If we would score the penalty the club honour would be saved, if not we were risking a catastrophe, and all the heavy guys hesitated. They didn't dare to take the penalty. There was too much on the line, so Tony that cocky guy stepped forward:

"I'll take it!"

That was a tough thing to do. Like a Balkan thing, you don't back down. But in hindsight I believe that someone should have stopped him. He was too young to take something like this on his shoulders. I remember during his run up when the whole team were holding their breath, or looked away. It was nasty. But the goalkeeper made a save, I think he feinted Tony a little bit, and we lost, and after that Tony was put in deep freeze by the coaches. I felt bad for the guy, and I know journalists who saw that like a symbolic thing. It was the moment when I slipped past him. Tony never came back to the highest level of football, and I got more playing time. I came in as a substitute six times in Allsvenskan and in some interview Roland called me an unpolished diamond. Those words stuck and soon enough little kids came up to me after the games and wanted my autograph. Not that it was a big thing at the time. But I got pumped by it, and thought: I have to get even sharper now! I can't let those little boys down.

Look here! I wanted to shout to them. Look at the coolest thing in the world! It was really a strange thing, right? I hadn't done anything yet, not much anyway. But still young fans from nowhere showed up, and I wanted to do even more tricks. Those little kids gave me the right to play like I did. They wouldn't have come up to me if I was the most boring team player! I started to play for the kids, and from the first moment I wrote autographs to everyone. No one should be without one. I was young myself. I understood exactly how it would have felt if my friends got one and I didn't.

"Is everyone satisfied?" I said before I dashed away, and on the whole it happened so much around me that I didn't care too much about what happened with the setbacks of the team. It was kind of sick. I was becoming like a household name when my club had the worst time ever at the same time. When we lost at home against Trelleborg, the fans were crying in the stands and were yelling "resign" to Roland. The police had to come in and protect him, and stones were thrown at the Trelleborg bus and there was riots and shit, and it didn't get better a couple of days later when we were humiliated by AIK and the catastrophe was a fact.

We were relegated from Allsvenskan. For the first time in sixty-four years Malmö FF wasn't going to play in the highest division, and in the locker room people sat and hid themselves behind towels and shirt



while the management tried to console and cheer, or whatever they were doing, and everywhere the frustration and shame was hissing, and some probably thought I was the biggest diva who just had ran around and dribbled in important games like this. But honestly, I didn't care that much. I had other things on my mind. Something incredible had happened.

It was exactly when I had been moved up to the first team. We had a training session and sure, we were Malmö FF. We were or had been the pride of the city. But not many people came and watched our trainings, especially not back then. But that afternoon an old man showed up in dark grey hair. I saw him from far away. I didn't recognize him. I noticed that he was looking at us from the threes over there, and I felt strange. Like I felt something, and I started doing even more tricks. But it took some time before I understood.

I always had to make it on my own during my childhood, and it was empty around me, and absolutely, my old man had done some incredible stuff also. But he wasn't like that other dads that I had seen. He hadn't watched any of my games, or encouraged me regarding school. He had his drinking and his war and his Yugoslav music. But now, I couldn't believe it. That old man actually was my dad. He was there to watch, and I was blown away. It was like I was dreaming and started playing with a sick power: Shit, dad is here! It's insane. Look here, I wanted to shout. Look here! Check this out! You son is the best player in the world.

I think that's one of the biggest moments of my life. I promise. I got him back. Not that I really had him before. It there was a crisis, he'd come running like the meanest Hulk. But like this, this was something new, and afterwards I ran up to him and talked to him like all cool and that, like it was something natural that he was there.

"What's up?"

"Well played, Zlatan"

It was insane. Dad had snapped, I believe. I became his drug. He started following everything I did. He watched every training session. His house became like a museum of my career, and he cut every article, every little press item, and it has continued like that. Ask him today about any of my games. He got it recorded and every word that is written about it, and then all the shirt and shoes that I've had and the awards and Guldbollarna (ed note: The Golden Ball, goes to the best Swedish player every year. Zlatan has six in a row). You name it, everything is there, and it's not like he got them in some disorder, like before with his stuff. Everything is on its place. He can find anything in a second. From that day he started living for me and my football, and I believe it helped him feel better. Life wasn't easy on him. He was lonely. Sanela had broken up with him because of his drinking and his temper and all his harsh words about mom, and that had taken a toll on him. Sanela was his heart, and she will always be. But now she wasn't there for him anymore. She had broken up with him, another one of those tough things in my family, you know, and dad needed something new, and now he got just that. We started talking every day, and all that became a driving force for me as well. It was wow, like, football can do wonders, and I fought even harder. What was a relegation to division two why the old man had become my biggest fan!

I didn't know what to do. Should I start playing in Superettan (ed note: Super one) like they called it nowadays instead of division two, what a silly name by the way, or should I look elsewhere? There were talks about AIK were after me. But was it true? I didn't have a clue. I didn't know shit about how hot I was. I wasn't even a starter in MFF. I was eighteen and should sign a senior contract. But I waited. Everything felt insecure, especially since Roland Andersson and Thomas Sjöberg had gotten fired. They had believed in me when everyone else was whining. Would I even get any playing time if I stayed? I didn't know and I hesitated. Both of me and my dad hesitated and how good was I really?

I didn't have a clue. I had written a couple of autographs to little kids. But that obviously didn't mean a thing, and my confidence went up and down. The first rush on enjoyment of being brought up to the first team started to fade away. But then I met a guy from Trinidad Tobago. It was during pre-season. He was cool. He was on a trial with us, and afterwards he came up to me.

"Hey kid", he said

"What?"

"If you're not a pro in three years, it's your own fault!"

"What do you mean?"

"You heard!"

Fucking of course I heard.

But it took some time to digest. Could it be true? If someone else had said it I would have hardly believed in it. But this guy, he apparently knew something. He had been around the world and it went like a dagger through my body. Was I really a pro talent in the making? I started to believe in it. For the first time I really did that and sharpened my play even more.

Hasse Borg, the old national team defender, had just become a sporting director in MFF. Hasse had a good eye on me at once. I guess he understood my talent, and he talked to journalists. Like, hey hey, you all should check this kid out, and in February next year a reporter who worked for Kvällsposten, named Rune Smith, came to the training. Rune was awesome. He could almost become a friend, and after watching me a little bit we talked, him and I, nothing special, not at all.

I talked about MFF and Superettan and my dreams of becoming a pro in Italy, like Ronaldo, and Rune took notes and smiled, and I don't really know what I expected. I had no experience of journalists at that time. But it became a big thing. Rune wrote like: "Taste this future news bill name, ZLATAN, this sounds exciting. And he's exciting. A different type of player, a dynamite package in the forward line", and then he mentioned the thing with unpolished diamond again and I expressed myself in a cocky and not in a typical Swedish manner in the article, and I don't know. There must have been something with that report. More and more little kids came up to me after the trainings and even some teenage girls as well, and even some adults. That was the start of the hysteria, all that "Zlatan, Zlatan!" that would become my life and that was unreal at first: Like what's going on? Is it me they're talking about?

I'd be lying if I didn't say that it was really awesome. I mean, what do you think? I had been trying to get some attention during my whole life and now suddenly people came up from nowhere and were impressed as hell and wanted my signature. Of course it was cool. It was the biggest rush in the world. I got pumped. I was filled with adrenalin. I flew forward. You know, I've heard a lot of people who say: "O, I've had such a tough time, people are shouting outside my window. They want my autograph. Like, poor me." That's bullshit.

You get a kick out of stuff like that, trust me, especially if you've been through the same things as me, and had been the kid from the ghetto. It's like the fattest head light shining on you. But of course, some things I couldn't really get yet, the jealousy and all that, the psychological stuff people use when they want to bring you down, especially if you're from the wrong place and don't act kindly and like a Swede. They taunted me as well. There was a lot of: "You just been lucky!" and "who do you think you are?"

I answered by becoming even more cocky. What else could I do? I wasn't raised to apologize. In my family you don't say: "Sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry that you got upset!" We got even. We fight if we have to, and we don't trust people just like that. Everyone in my family had their problems, and my old man always said: "Don't do anything prematurely. People just want to take advantage of you," and I listened, and I thought. But it wasn't easy. During this time Hasse Borg was running around in some nice costume and tried to get me to sign a senior contract. He was really on me, and I was flattered by it. I felt important. We had a new coach at that time, Micke Andersson, and I was still not sure about how much I was going to play. Micke Andersson apparently wanted to go with Niclas Kindvall and Mats Lilienberg in the offence and have me as a substitute, and I didn't want to go down to Superettan just to sit on the bench.

I discussed it with Hasse Borg, and you can say all kinds of things about him. But I don't think it's a coincidence that he had success in business life. He was straight forward in his style. He's a bastard when it comes to persuade, and he used his experience from his own playing career and went on: "This will be good, kid. We will venture on you and Superettan will be a perfect place for you to grow. You'll get opportunities to develop. Just sign."

I know that I agreed. I started to get confidence for the guy. He called me all the time and gave advice, and I thought: Why not? He probably knows. He had been a pro in Germany and all that, and it looked like he really cared about me. "Agents are thieves", he said, and I believed him.

There was a guy who was after me. His name was Roger Ljung. Roger Ljung is a agent, and he wanted me. But my dad was sceptical and I didn't know anything about agents. What's that, kind of? So I bought what Hasse Borg had said, agents are thieves, and I signed his contract and got a apartment in Lorensborg, a single room apartment not far away from the stadium, and a mobile phone, which meant a lot, the phone at my dad's wasn't for me, and a salary of sixteen thousands each month (ed note: 1600 Euro).

I decided to really give it a go. But it started out badly. In the first game of the season in Superettan away against a little team, Gunnilse, and we should have won big. But the blockages were still there, and I sat on the bench. Fuck, was it going to be like this? The stands were boring and it was windy and when I eventually came in I got a bad elbow in my back. I punched the opponent in the back, bang, just like that, and then I bad mouthed the referee who also gave me a yellow card. There was a big circus about that, both on the pitch and in the newspapers and Hasse Mattisson, our captain, just went on about how I spread negative energy around me.

"What negative energy? I'm just pumped."

"You don't let go of things." And then some bullshit that I really wasn't the star I believed I was and that everyone else could do the same tricks that I did. They just didn't want to show off and act like Maradona, and I got frustrated. There's a picture of me when I'm outside the bus in Gunnilse looking mad.

But it let go with time. I started playing better and I have to give it to Hasse Borg; Superettan gave me playing time and opportunities to develop. I have to be grateful for the relegation in a way, and soon enough things started to happen.

It was insane if you think about it. I was no Ronaldo yet, and the newspapers in Sweden usually don't care about division two football. But the biggest newspapers had coverage's of me: "Superdiva in Superettan" and stuff like that, and Malmö FF Supporter Club got an unexpected raise in female applicants, and all the older guys in the team was like wondering: What's going on? What's happening? And it wasn't really easy to understand, especially not for me. In the stands people were waving posters: "Zlatan is the king", and shouted the biggest rock star shouts when I did my dribbling. What happened? What has that about? I didn't know. I still really don't know.

But I guess a lot of people just became happy when I did my tricks and show things and I heard a lot of "Wow", and "ohh ohhh ohhh" now as well, just like at my mom's block, that I got a kick. I grew when people knew me around the city and the girls yelled and the kids ran to me with their autograph books, and I did my thing even harder. But of course, sometimes it got out of hand. For the first time in my life I had some money, and with me money from the first pay check I got my license in an intensive course. For a guy from Rosengård is the car something fundamental, you could easily say that.

In Rosengård you don't brag about the nice apartment and beach house. You brag about the fattest car, and if you want to show that you've made it in life, it's with a nice ride. In Rosengård everyone drives a car, with or without a driving license, and when I got my Toyota Celica on leasing me and my friends were out all the time and back then I had been starting to cool down a little bit. The whole stir in media made me want to do the "right things", at least a little bit, and when my friends started stealing cars and stuff like that, I told them:

"Stuff like this doesn't work for me anymore."

But still, I needed some kicks, like when me and a friend of mine were driving up the Industrigatan (ed note: gata=road) where all the prostitutes in Malmö worked. Industrigatan isn't far away from Rosengård, and I had been there and done some crazy stuff as a kid. Once I even threw an egg in the head of one of the women, just a stupid thing like that, not so pleasant, I admit. But back then I didn't think that far, and now when me and my friend were there in my Toyota we saw a prostitute who stood there bend over a car, like she was talking to a costumer, and then we said: "come on, let's mess with the punter" and we parked the car just in front of his and then we rushed out and yelled:

"It's the police! Get your hands up!"

It was sick. I had a shampoo bottle in my hand like the wackest toy gun, and that customer, some old man, became really afraid and drove away really fast from the situation. We didn't think more of it, it was just a thing we did. But when we drove further away we heard sirens, and behind us in a police car that old man from Industrigatan sat in the back, and we thought: What's happening? What's this? And of course, we could have gotten away from the area. We weren't strangers to stuff like that, after all. But fuck it, we had our belts on and we hadn't really done anything bad, not really. So we stopped.

"We were just messing around", we said. "We were playing cops, not a big thing, right? We're sorry," and the cops were mostly laughing, and like it wasn't a big deal.

But then some chump showed up, one of those photographers, who sit and listen to the police radio all day, and he took a picture, and as the idiot I am I put on a big smile, because the whole media thing was new to me then. It was still a cool thing to be in the newspapers, didn't matter if I had done an awesome goal or if the cop had busted me. That's why I smiled like a clown, and my friend took it even further. He had the picture framed and put it on his wall, and that old man, do you know what he did? He went out in interviews and said that he really was the nicest old man from church who only wanted to help the prostitutes. Get out of here! But that story hanged around. It was even said that some clubs didn't want to buy me because of that incident. That was probably bullshit.

But the newspapers became even wilder after that, and some on my team mates moaned and whined, "he really has a lot to learn", "he's very unpolished", and really, I get them. It couldn't have been easy. They probably needed to put me down once in a while. Here was I from out of nowhere and got more attention in a week than they had gotten during their whole careers and on top on that some types in sharp costumes and with the fattest watches showed up and in the boring stands in the countryside's we were playing at during that season, guys who didn't look like they were belonging there, and all of them were watching me.

Afterwards I don't even know when I understood, or even thought about it. But people started to talk about those guys, and they said that they were talent scouts from European club, and that they were there to study me. The guy from Trinidad Tobago had indeed prepared me for it, but it still felt unreal and I tried to talk about it with Hasse Borg. He slipped away. He didn't seem to like the topic.

"Is it true, Hasse? Foreign clubs are after me?"

"Take it easy, kid."

"But who are they?"

"It's nothing, Hasse Borg said." "And we're not selling you", and I thought: Sure, fine, I'm not in that of a hurry after all, and I tried to negotiate a better contract instead.

"If you give me five good games in a row I'll give you a new deal", Hasse Borg said, and then I did it, I played great in five, six, seven games and then we sat down and talked about the terms.

I raised my salary with about ten thousands, and raised it ten thousand more later on, and I thought it was OK. I didn't really have a clue, and I went to my dad and proudly showed him my contract. He wasn't as impressed. He had totally changed. He was the biggest interested supporter now and instead of digging himself down into the war or something else, he sat at home all day and read stuff about football, and when he read the paragraph about sales to foreign clubs he jumped.

"What the fuck", he said. "There's nothing in this contract about how much you're going to get."

"How much should I get?"

"You should get ten percent of the money if you get sold. Or else they're using you", and I thought that I would really want ten or twenty percent. But I didn't understand how we should get that money. If there was an opening for something like that then Hasse Borg would have mentioned it, right?

But I asked him anyway. I didn't want to give in to easily. "Hey, Hasse", I said. "Can I get ten percent if I get sold?" But of course, I hadn't expected anything else. "Sorry kid!" he said. "It doesn't work like that", and then I told my dad about it. I figured that we wouldn't give up.

If it doesn't work, then it doesn't work. But it was the other way around. He got mad, and asked me for Hasse Borg's number. He called once, twice, three times, and eventually got a hold of him, and he didn't settle for a "no" on the phone. He demanded a meeting and it got settled, we were going to meet Hasse Borg at ten then next day at his office, and can you imagine. I was nervous. Dad is dad, and I was worried

that it might become a bit wild and crazy, and honestly, it wasn't so balanced either! Dad got out of hand pretty soon. He started sputtering and hit the desk with his fist:

"Is my son a horse?"

Nah, of course Hasse Borg didn't feel I was a horse.

"Why are you treating him like one then?"

"We're not treating him..."

It went on like that, and eventually my dad explained to MFF that they weren't going to see me anymore. I wouldn't play one second if the contract wasn't going to be re-negotiated, then Hasse Borg started to turn pale from what I understand, and I get it, honestly. You don't mess with dad. He's like a lion, and we got those ten percent in the contract, and that would mean a lot. All credit to dad for that, and all that happened should be a lesson, something to have in mind. But agents were still thieves and I still trusted Hasse Borg. He was my mentor, like, a real extra dad. He invited me to his farm on the country side, and I got to meet his dog, the kids and wife and the animals, and I asked him for advice when I bought my Mercedes Cabriolet on instalments.

But at the same time, how should I put it? The situation was on the edge. My confidence was growing, and I became bolder. I scored more artistic goals, and all the Brazilian tricks I had practiced on hour after hour were starting to work. All the hard work with that stuff started to pay off. I the junior team they gave me a hard time for it and the parents whined: Oh, he's dribbling again! He doesn't play for the team, and that. But now I got cheers and applause from the stands, and I got it right away, this is my chance. A lot of people were still moaning. But it gets tougher on them when we're winning and the crowd loves me.

The autograph hunters and the roars and the posters in the sea of crowds gave me power, and I got in a great form. Against Västerås on away turf I got a pass from Hasse Mattison. It was on stoppage time. The game was almost over. But I saw a glitch and chipped the ball over myself and a couple of opponents, Majstorovic was one of them, it was a beautiful little thing, and I could put the ball in to goal.

I scored twelve goals in Superettan, more than anyone in MFF, and we qualified to Allsvenskan and I was definitely an important player in the team. I wasn't just the individualist, like some said. I started making the difference, and all the time the hysteria around me increased, and at that time I didn't said only some boring stuff.

I hadn't had any problems with media yet. I was myself with the journalists and I told them about what cars I wanted and which games I played, and I said stuff like "There's only one Zlatan" and "Zlatan is Zlatan", not all that humble stuff, and I guess that I was seen as something totally new. It wasn't the usual "the ball is round", and that, (ed note: I think this is a Swedish expression only. It means that anything can happen on the football field).

It was more freely, from the heart. I talked almost like I did at home, and even Hasse Borg admitted that I was popular and that talent scouts were lurking in the bushes. "But we have to stay cool."

Afterwards I got to hear that about one agent called him about me every day. I was hot, and I guess that he already then suspected that could become the saviour of the club economy. I was his golden boy, like media put it later, and one day he came up to me and asked:

"What about going on a trip?"

"Sure, I'd love to"

It was a little tour, he explained, to different clubs that were interested in buying me, and I felt, fuck, it's really happening.

## CHAPTER 6

In a way I couldn't keep up. Things happened too fast. A minute ago I was a problem kid on the youth squad. Now everything was happening. Me and Hasse Borg drove out to Arsenal's training grounds in St. Albans in north London, can you imagine.

It was classic ground, and I saw Patrick Viera, Thierry Henry and Dennis Bergkamp on the field. But the really cool thing was that I was going to meet Arsène Wenger. Wenger was quite new at the club then. He was the first non-Englishman who had gotten the job as coach of Arsenal and the papers had headlines like like "Arsène who?". Like who the fuck is Arsène Wenger? But already the second season he took the double, both the league and the FA-cup, and became huge, and I felt like a little kid when we stepped into his office.

It was me, Hasse Borg and an agent I've forgotten the name of and Wenger's way of looking at me gave me the chills. He was kind of trying to look through me, or finding out who I was deep within. He's a guy who makes psychological profiles on his players, are they emotionally stable and stuff like that. He's very careful about things, like all big coaches, and I didn't talk much at first.

I was just sitting there, being very shy, but after a while I lost patience. Something about Wenger provoked me. And he flew out of his chair every now and then to see who was outside his window. Like he wanted complete control of things, and he went on and on about one thing constantly.

"You can test and practice with us", he said. "You can feel it out. You can try."

No matter how much I wanted to behave, those words triggered me. I wanted to show him what I could do.

"Give me a pair of shoes. I'll practice. I'll do it right away", I said and then Hasse Borg interrupted and said "Stop, stop, we'll work it out, this isn't an audition, not at all", and of course, I got his point: you're either interested or you're not. Auditioning is a downer. It makes you an underdog, so we said no. "We're sorry Mr. Wenger, but we're not interested, and there's been a lot of talk about that later."

But I'm sure it was the right decision, and we continued down to Monte Carlo, where Monaco were interested, but we said no to them as well, and also further on to Verona in Italy, a sister club of Roma, and then we went home. It had been a cool trip, for sure. But nothing came out of it, and I guess nothing was supposed to. I was more supposed to get an idea about how things worked on the continent, and back in Malmö it was cold and winter. I got sick in the flu.

By then I had been picked for the under 21 national team. But I had to cancel my first game, and some scouts and agents had to go home disappointed. The scouts were following me everywhere. I didn't have much of a clue about those things. There was only one guy I knew a little bit. A danish guy. John Steen Olsen was his name. He'd been watching me for Ajax for so long that we started saying hello. But I didn't make a big deal out of it. He was just part of the circus, and I didn't know what was bullshit and what was true. The whole thing was more real though after our trip. But I still couldn't really believe it. I took one day at a time and remember looking forward to going on training camp with MFF.

We were going to La Manga. It was the beginning of March, and I felt good physically. The sun was shining. La Manga is a bit of coast on Spain's southeast corner, a tourist place with long beaches and bars. Close to the mainland there is a training facility where some major clubs do their pre-season work. I shared a room with Gudmundur Mete, the Icelander. We'd been following each other since the youth team, and none of us had been on a camp like this before. We didn't know the rules and came late to dinner the first night and got fined. We just laughed about it, and the morning after we went to practice. It wasn't a big deal.

But on the sideline I spotted a familiar dude. It was that John Steen Olsen guy, and I flinched. Was he here too? I said: Hello, hello! Nothing more. I didn't wanna get all fired up. Those guys were everywhere. I'd gotten used to it. But the next day there was another guy there. I was told it was the head scout from Ajax, and Hasse Borg seemed all stressed out.

"Now things are starting to happen! Things are happening!" he said and I replied: "OK, great!"



I just went on playing. But it wasn't all easy. All of sudden there were three guys from Ajax there. The assisting coach also arrived, and Hasse Borg told me even more people were coming. It was like an invasion, and we'd face norwegian team Moss the next day. By then head coach Co Adriaanse and sporting director Leo Beenhakker were there.

I didn't know anything about Beenhakker then; I didn't know anything about the football bosses in Europe at that time. But I realized immediately that this guy was a big shot. He wore a hat in the sun and was smoking a fat cigar. He had white curly hair, and kind of shining eyes. It's been said he looks like the crazy scientist in "Back to the future", but if that was true he was a tougher version of him. Beenhakker radiated power and coolness. He looked a bit like a mafia guy, and I like that. That's the style I've grown up with, and it didn't surprise me one bit that Beenhakker had coached Real Madrid and won both the league and the cup with them. It was obvious he had been calling shots and dominated, and it was said that he could see the potential in young players that no one else could, and I thought: Wow, this is it! But of course, there was a lot of stuff I didn't know about. Beenhakker had several times tried getting Hasse Borg to decide a price for me. Hasse had refused. He didn't want to fix my price to a certain amount.

"The guy isn't for sale", he had said and that was probably smart. But a dangerous game. Beenhakker had said:

"If you don't say a price I won't come to La Manga!"

"That's your problem. Don't come then", Hasse Borg answered, at least that's what he says, and Beenhakker folded.

He had flown to Spain, and the first thing he'd see was our game against Moss. Afterwards I don't remember seeing him on the sideline. I only saw John Steen Olsen, and the coach, Co Adriaanse, over next to the opponent's goal. But apparently Beenhakker had climbed up on a shed next to the field to get a better view, and of course, he must have been prepared for a disappointment. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd travelled far just to watch a talent not meeting the expectations, and it wasn't an important game either. There were no reasons for anyone to give it his everything, and maybe it would just be another boring game. No one knew. The guys from Ajax were talking now and then, and I felt a bit nervous.

But quite early in the first half I received a pass from the right. I was just outside the box, and we wore our light blue shirts. The time was 15.37 if we should believe the shaky video which is on YouTube. It was hot, but with some winds from the coast, and it didn't look like a dangerous situation. It was a passive game. But I saw an opening, a possibility. It was one of those images that just appears in my head, one of those quick scenes which blows through my head and that I never have been able to really explain. Football isn't something you plan. Football just happens, and on direct touch I flipped the ball over a defender, one of those small lobbs that you instantly know are perfect, and I ran. I accelerated past two defenders and met the ball a few meters into the box and came in perfect position to heel the ball. I heeled it over another defender and advanced to shoot it on volley. And for a moment you wonder, you have time to think although it's just a tenth of a second: Is it a goal? A miss? But no, it fired in the net. It was one of the most beautiful things I've done, and I ran over the field with my arms straight out and screamed. The journalists who were there thought I screamed "Zlatan, Zlatan!" But please, why would I shout my own name? I said "Showtime, showtime!".

It was a showtime-goal, and I can imagine what Beenhakker was thinking. He must have freaked out. He could never have seen anything like it. But later I found out that he also became worried. He had found what he was looking for; a big player who had technique and could score, and who just like that had scored the most amazing goal. But he was clever enough to realize that I had skyrocketed my value with that scoring, and if any other big clubs had spies in place there would be a crazy bidding war. So Leo Beenhakker decided to go for it immediately. He jumped down that shed and went to Hasse Borg.

"I want to meet that guy now, immediately", he said, because you know, in football it isn't just about the player; it's the person as well. It doesn't matter if the player is amazing if he's got the wrong attitude. You buy the complete package.

"I don't know if that's possible", Hasse Borg said.

"What do you mean 'not possible'?"

"Maybe we don't have time for that. We have lots of activities and stuff planned!"

Beenhakker got mad, because of course he got it.

There were no fucking activities. Hasse Borg must have had an orgasm. The guy knew he had ace of the deck, and now he wanted to act difficult and do all his tricks.

"What do you mean? He's a young guy. You're on training camp. Of course there's time."

"Maybe, but just a quickie", Hasse Borg said, or something like that, and they agreed we'd meet at the Ajax guys' hotel which was some bit away.

We went there. In the car Hasse Borg went on and on about how important it was that I showed a good and positive attitude. But I was calm. Maybe Ajax wanted to buy me, and sure, that was huge, and if things were different maybe I'd been nervous.

I wasn't used to foreign hot shots at that time, and even less so with big business. But you own the world after a goal like that. It's easy being charming, and me and Hasse Borg entered their hotel and shook hands with everyone. Like "How do you do", and we talked a bit in general, and I smiled and said I really wanted to give football my everything and that I knew it was hard work, stuff like that. It was like a theatre act and everyone showed their nice side. But of course, there was seriousness and suspicion underneath. They were all looking at me: Who is he, really? Especially I remember Leo Beenhaaker. He leaned forward and said:

"If you fuck with me I'll fuck you two times back", and really, that impressed me.

It was my kind of talk, it was tounge in cheek. But of course, his guys had probably done their research. They probably knew everything about me, including that thing om Industrigatan. Not that I thought about it then. But his words could be taken as a warning, right? And I remember us going back to our hotel just 15 minutes later, and I remember not being able to sit still.

There is one kind of game on the pitch. There is another kind of game on the transfer market, I like them both, and I know some tricks. I know when to be quiet and I know when to start a war. But I've learned the difficult way. In the beginning I didn't know anything. I was just a kid who wanted to play football, and after the meeting in La Manga I didn't hear a single word about Ajax, not for a while.

I went home, and at this time I was driving a blue Mercedes convertible, not the one I ordered, but a loaner I'd gotten while waiting for the real deal, and I don't think I was going anywhere. I was just cruising around feeling like the cool guy, and in the backseat was a ball if I'd feel like playing. Just an ordinary day in Malmö, in other words.

The start of the Allsvenskan season was still a few weeks away, and I was going to play an under 21 national team game in Borås, but a part from that things were cool. It was just practice, hanging with friends and playing video games. Then the phone rang. It was Hasse Borg. Nothing strange about that. We called each other all the time. But he sounded different.

"Are you busy?" he asked, and I couldn't really say that I was.

"But are you ready? Are you prepared?"

"Sure. Why?"

"They are here now."

"Who?"

"Ajax. Come down to Hotel S:t Jörgen. We're waiting for you", he said, and sure, of course, I drove down there.

I parked outside, and of course, my heart was pounding. I understood that things were happening, and I had told Hasse Borg that I wanted to be sold for record amounts. I wanted to be history. There was a swedish player who had gone to Arsenal for fourty million, that was a lot back then, and a norwegian guy, John Carew, who Valencia payed seventy for. It was a record in Scandinavia, and I had my hopes of beating that. But man, I was nineteen.

It wasn't easy being tough when things really were happening, and do you remember? We from the suburbs wore tracksuits, and sure, I had tried other styles at Borgarskolan. But now I had my Nike tracksuit again and a cap on the head, but that was wrong. When I came into S:t Jörgen, John Steen Olsen met me, and sure, I knew that everything was top secret. Ajax is listed on the stock exchange, it would be insider info if anything got out. But then I saw Cecilia Persson, and I flipped. What was Cecilia doing there? I didn't expect to meet people from Rosengård at S:t Jörgen. It was another world. Far from

the suburbs. But there she was. She and I had grown up in the same building, and she was my mom's best friend's daughter. But then I remembered, she was cleaning at the hotel. She was a cleaner just like my mom, and now she looked suspiciously at me: What is Zlatan doing with those guys, kind of, and I hushed her, like "don't say anything". And I took the elevator and went into a conference room, and there were some guys in suits, there was Beenhaaker, his finance guy, and Hasse Borg of course and I knew instantly there was something weird in the air.

Hasse was all nervous, there was adrenaline all over him, but of course, he acted cool: "Hey kid! You see, we can't say a word about this yet. But do you want to go to Ajax? They want you" and even if I'd had a hunch, I got excited.

"Absolutely!" I answered. "Ajax is a good school", and everyone nodded and smiled.

But still, there was something strange going on, and I shook hands and was told that I now would negotiate my personal contract, and for some reason Beenhakker and his guys left the room, and I was left alone with Hasse Borg. What the fuck was going on with Hasse? He had the hugest snus under his lip and showed me a block of paper.

"Check this out. I've done this for you", he said, and I looked at the papers. It said a hundred and sixty thousand per month, and of course, that was a lot of money, it was, wow, am I getting that? But I had no clue if it was good compared to the market, and I said so.

"Is this good?"

"Hell yeah, of course", Hasse said. "It's four times what you make today", and I thought okay, he was probably right, it was a lot of money, and I could feel how stressed he was.

"Let's go for it, I said.

"Great, Zlatan! Congratulations!" Then he went out, he'd negotiate some he said, and when he came back he looked really proud. It was like he had fixed the world's best deal.

"They will pay for your new Mercedes also, it's on them", and that was awesome too I thought, and answered "Wow, cool".

But I still didn't know anything more about the deal, or was thinking that this thing with the car maybe was like nothing, because honestly, what do you think? That I was prepared for that change?

I wasn't prepared one god damn bit. I didn't know anything about what football players made or what taxes they had in Holland, and I really didn't have anyone who spoke for me or looked after my best interests. I was nineteen years old and from Rosengård. I didn't know anything about the world. I knew as much as Cecilia outside, and as you know, I thought Hasse Borg was my friend, my extra dad kind of. I never understood that he was only thinking about one thing: making money for the club, and it would really take a long time before I understood what that weird vibe in that room had been about. But sure, those guys in suits had been in the middle of a negotiation.

They hadn't even decided on a price for me, and the reason I had been called there was that of course it's easier getting a transfer in place if you first sign the player and decide his salary, because then you know what kind of money you have to play with. If your then so smart to make sure the guy the guy gets the lowest pay in the entire team, then it's much easier getting a high fee. I was simply used in that strategy game.

But I didn't know anything about that back then. I just stepped out in the lobby and cheered of joy, or something like that, but I think I was quite good at keeping my mouth shut. The only one I told was my dad, and wise as he is, he was sceptical. He didn't trust people. But me, I just let it happen, and the next day I went to Borås to play the U21 national against Macedonia. It was a Euro qualifier and my debut in the youth national team, and it should have been a big deal. But of course my mind was elsewhere and I remember meeting Hasse Borg and Leo Beenhakker again and signed the contract, They were done negotiating then.

But still we had to keep it secret until two o'clock the afternoon when it would be announced in Holland, and I found out a whole bunch of foreign agents had come to town to check me out. But they came for nothing. I was an Ajax player. I was walking on clouds, and I asked Hasse Borg:

"What was my price?" and the answer, seriously, I will never forget it.

He had to repeat himself. It was like I didn't understand what he said, and maybe he first mentioned it in guilden, and that wasn't a currency I knew. But then I realized how much it was and I flipped like fuck. Okay, I had hoped for a record transfer. I wanted to leave for more than John Carew, but seeing it black on white was something completely different. It was mindblowing. It was eighty five fucking million! But most importantly, no Swede, no Scandinavian, not even Henke Larsson, not John Carew had been sold for anything close that figure, and of course I realized that there would be a lott of press. I was used to some media.

But still, when I got the papers the next day - it was insane. The press had a Zlatan orgy. It was the money kid. It was Zlatan the incredible. It was Zlatan all kinds of things, and I read everything and enjoyed it, and I remember when I went for coffee in Borås with Chippen and Kennedy Bakircioglu in the under 21 national team. We were sitting at a coffee shop having a soda and a bun, and suddenly some girls our age came up to us, and one of them said, kind of shy: "Are you the eighty five million guy?" I mean, how do you answer that?

"Absolutely", I said. "That's me", and my phone rang all the time.

People were sucking up and congratulating and were quite jealous, all except one, mom. She was furious. "My god, Zlatan, what happened?" she screamed. "Have you been kidnapped? Are you dead?" She had seen me on TV and didn't really understand what they said, and normally, if you're from Rosengård and in the media it's bad news.

"It's cool, mom. I've just been sold to Ajax", I said, and then she got mad instead. "Why didn't you tell me? Why do I hear about things like that on the TV?"

But she calmed down, and I can become quite touched when I think about it, and the next day I went to Holland with John Steen Olsen and I wore that pink sweater and brown leather jacket which was the coolest outfit I had, and I held a press conference in Amsterdam. It was quite a chaos with photographers and journalists sitting and standing all over the place, and I shone. I looked down. I was happy and insecure. I was big and small at the same time, and I tried champagne for the first time in my life and made faces, like "Uh, what kind of shit is this, and I got shirt number nine from Beenhakker, the one that had been worn by Van Basten.

It was almost too much and around this time some guys were making a documentary about me and MFF which is called "Blådårar", and those guys followed me to Amsterdam and filmed me with the club's sponsor at a Mitsubishi dealership and I walk around in my brown leather jacket checking out the cars.

"Strange just being able to walk in here and pick one. But I'll get used to it I guess", I say, smiling.

It was the first time I got that awesome feeling that anything is possible. Honestly, it was like a fairytale, and spring was in the air, and I went to the Ajax stadium stood there in the empty stands sucking a lollipop, thinking. And all the time the journalists went more wild. They did the story about the kid from the ghetto who got to live the dream and the next day they wrote that Zlatan had gotten a taste of professional football and a life in luxury. That was when Allsvenskan was about to start. Hasse Borg had negotiated that I would stay in MFF for another six months, so I had to go straight from Amsterdam back to Malmö and practice. I remember it was a cold day.

I had cut my hair and I was happy I hadn't seen my teammates for a while. But now they were all sitting there in the dressing room reading with the papers on their laps, reading about my "life of luxury". You can see the scene in "Blådårar". I walk in, laughing, taking my jacket off, screaming of joy, a wild little "Jiiiaa!" and they raise their heads. I almost feel sorry for them.

They all look sad. Of course they're green with envy, no one more than Hasse Mattisson, the guy who fought me in Gunnilse. He looks devastated, but still, he's a nice guy. He's the team captain and he means well. At least he tries:

"Congratulations. This is great! Just do it", he says, but he doesn't fool anyone, certainly not the camera.

The camera pans from his sad eyes to me, and I'm just sitting there smiling, happy as a kid, and maybe, I don't know, some kind of mania infected me those days. Something always has to happen. I wanted action, action. Like making a drama, a show, and that's why I did some stupid things. I got some blonde

loops in my hair, and I got engaged, not that it was stupid getting engaged with Mia or anything. She was a good girl, she studied web design and was blonde and pretty, and a forward person. We had met at Cyprus the summer before where she worked in some bar and switched numbers, and started hanging in Sweden had a fun together. But there was like a fever in that engagement, and since I still hadn't any blocks towards media, I told Rune Smith at Kvällsposten about it. That's when he asks:

"What did you give her as engagement present?"

"Present? She got Zlatan."

She got Zlatan! It was one of those comments that just came, a quote bouncing out of me, and sounded cocky, right in line with my media image, and that's still mentioned all the time. It was just that: a few weeks later Mia got nothing. I broke off the engagement since a friend fooled me into believing I would have to get married within a year, and in general I was doing a lot of those sudden unexpected things. I was like on speed. Too much was going on around me and the start of Allsvenskan was getting closer, and you can imagine, that was when I would have to prove that I really was worth those eighty five million. The day before Anders Svensson and Kim Källström had scored two goals in their opening games of Allsvenskan and there was talk about me not being able to handle my new stardom. Maybe I was just an overvalued teenager. Like most of the time those years they talked about me being blown out of proportions by the media, and I felt I had to perform. That was a lot to carry around, and I remember Malmö Stadium was boiling. It was the 9th of April 2001.

I had my blue Mercedes convertible and I was so proud of it. But when Rune Smith interviewed me ahead of the game I didn't want them to take pictures of me next to it. I didn't want to seem too cocky. It felt like that shit would come back to me, and I heard some doubts: the pressure will be too much, stuff like that, and it wasn't all easy handling that. I was nineteen, and everything had happened too quickly, Still, I was triggered by it. Everything was on a new level now. But that feeling of wanting to get back at everyone who never believed in me I had had for a long time. I had been driven by revenge and anger all since I began playing and now there were a lot of expectations and concern in the air. We were facing AIK. Not an easy first game.

Last time we met them we had been humiliated and sent down to the second division and now before this season, many thought AIK were among the favourites to win Allsvenskan, and really, who were we? We had just been promoted from the second division even without winning it. Still, the pressure seemed to be on us, and people said it was mainly because of me, the eighty five million guy. Malmö Stadium was packed, almost twenty thousand people, and I ran in that long corridor with the blue floor towards the field and I heard the pounding sound from out there. It was huge, I understood that, this was the return to Allsvenskan, but still, I could hardly understand it.

Papers flew through the air. People held cards and signs and when we lined up they were screaming something, at first I didn't hear what it was. It was "We love Malmö", but also my name. It was like an amazing choir and on those signs it said "Good luck Zlatan" and stuff like that and I just stood there on the pitch and just pumped everything towards my ears with my hand, like: Give me more, give me more, and honestly, all who doubted me were right with at least one thing. Everything was set for a terrible game. It was too much.

A quarter to nine the game began, and the audience just got louder. In those days scoring wasn't the most important thing. It was the show, the artistry, all those things I practiced over and over, and early in the game I made a tunnel on an AIK-defender and made some dribbles. Then I disappeared from the game and AIK took over and had chance after chance and things didn't look so good for us. Maybe I wanted too much. That was something I knew already back then. If you want too much, you'll easily lock up.

But I tried to relax and after thirty minutes I got the ball Peter Sörensen right outside the box. It didn't feel like a great opportunity at first. But I made a move. I pulled the ball with me with a heel and advanced and shot a broadside in goal and oh my god, I experienced it like a shock: now comes the explosion, it happens now, and I celebrated down on my knees while the entire stadium screamed "Zlatan, Zlatan, SuperZlatan", all kinds of those things, and afterwards it was like I was being carried ahead.

I did trick after trick, and in the ninth minute in the second half I got another nice ball from Sörensen. I was out wide on the right and ran towards the line. It didn't seem like an angle to shoot from, not at all, and everyone thought he's passing. But I shot at goal anyway. From that impossible angle I scored again and the stadium went totally crazy, and I walked there slowly with my arms pointed outwards, and that face I make! That is power, that is: Here I am, you fuckers who were only whining and trying to get me away from football.

It was revenge, it was pride, and I guess all those who said those eighty five million were too much got to eat it, and I'll never forget the reporters afterwards. They were practically shining, and one of them said: "If I say Anders Svensson and Kim Källström, what do you say?" "I say Zlatan, Zlatan", and people were laughing and I stepped out into the spring evening, and there was my Mercedes convertible, and it was huge.

But it took a while getting to it. Young kids, boys and girls, were everywhere and wanted my autograph, so I stayed there forever, no one would leave without one that was part of my philosophy. I would pay back, and after that I stepped into my new car and sped out of there while the fans were screaming and waiving their autographs, and that could have been enough. But it wasn't over, that was just the beginning, and the next day the papers came out, and what do you think? Did they write anything?

They wrote like crazy, and apparently I had said when we were relegated from Allsvenskan: "I want people to forget about me. You shouldn't even know I exist. Later, when we return I will hit the football field like a lightning", and the papers used that quote.

I became the lightning that struck. I became all kinds of cool things and they were even talking about a Swedish Zlatan fever. I was everywhere, in all the media, and they said not only young kids read it. It was the lady at the post office, the old man at the liquor store, and I heard jokes like "Hey, what's up? How are you?" "I think I have the Zlatan fever", and I was walking on air. It was amazing. Some guys even made a song which became a huge hit. You heard it everywhere. People had it as a ringtone on their mobile phones: "Ohiya, Zlatan and me, we're from the same town" they were singing, and I mean, how do you handle something like that? They're singing about you. But of course, there was a flipside to everything, and I saw it in the third round of Allsvenskan. It was on April 21st. We were in Stockholm to play against Djurgården.

Djurgården was the team which was relegated with us and also advanced back together with us, Djurgården as the winner and we in second place, and to tell the truth, they had beaten the shit out of us in the second division, the first time with 2-0 and the second with 4-1, so in that way, sure they had an advantage. But still, we had beaten both AIK and Elfsborg with 2-0 in our first two games, and most importantly, Malmö FF had me. Everyone was talking about it, Zlatan, Zlatan, I was hotter than lava, and people said national team coach Lars Lagerbäck was in the stands to check me out.

But of course this also annoyed even more people: What the fuck is so special about that guy? One of the tabloids even approached the entire defence line of Djurgården. I remember there were three big guys, who stood with their arms crossed all over the middle spread in the paper, and above them the headline: "We are the ones putting an end to the overrated diva Zlatan", and I guess I expected quite an aggressive mood on the field. It was a prestigious game, and clearly it would be a rough one, but still, I got the chills when I stepped out on the Stockholm Stadium.

The Djurgården fans were spewing hatred, or if it wasn't hatred, at least they were the worst psychings I've ever experienced: "We hate Zlatan, we hate Zlatan!" It was like thunder around me. The entire audience was against me, and I heard a lot of other things, lots of mean shit about me and my mom.

I had never experienced anything like it, and ok, somehow I could understand it. The fans couldn't run down on the pitch themselves and play ball, so what did they do? They attacked the best player of the other team, they tried to break me, and it's natural in a way. That's the way it is in football. But this was over the line, and it pissed me off. I was going to show them, and in a way I was playing more against the audience than the other team. But just like against AIK it took a while before I got into the game.

I was roughly marked. They had those leeches from the newspaper after me, and Djurgården dominated the first twenty minutes. We had bought a guy from Nigeria. His name was Peter Ijeh and he had the reputation of being a great goal scorer. He became the league's top scorer the season after. But at that time he was still in my shadow. Who wasn't? He received a pass in the 21st minute, from Daniel Majstorović, who later would become a close friend of mine.

Peter Ijeh scored 1-0, and in the 68th minute he assisted Joseph Elanga beautifully, the other african player we had bought that year, Elanga tackled a defender and scored 2-0. The audiences were booing, they were screaming, and of course, I sucked, I was nobody. I hadn't scored, just like those defenders had said I wouldn't, and sure, up until then I hadn't been very good.

I had done some tricks and also a heel pass down by the corner flag, but apart from that it had more been Ijeh's and Majstorović's game than mine, and there was no magic in the air when I received the ball two minutes later in the middle of the field. But it would change, because suddenly I dribbled one guy, it just happened, and then another one, and I felt: Wow, I'm light, I have control, so I continued.

It was like a dance and even if I didn't know it then I dribbled all those defenders from the newspaper and shot the ball into the net with my left toe, and honestly, that feeling, it wasn't just joy. It was revenge. This is for you, I thought, this is for all your words and all your hatred, and I figured my fight with the audience would continue even after the game.

I mean, we had humiliated Djurgården, the game ended 4-0, but do you know what happened? I was surrounded by Djurgården fans, and no one wanted to fight or hate anymore. They wanted my autograph. They were like crazy for me, and honestly, when I think back about those times, a lot is about stuff like that, about how it was possible to turn everything around with a goal or some show thing. You know, there was no movie I loved more back then than "Gladiator" and there is a scene there, everyone knows it, when the emperor comes down in the arena and asks the gladiator to remove his mask and the gladiator does that and says:

"My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius ... And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next."

That was how I felt, or wanted to feel, I wanted to stand there in front of the whole world and show all those who had doubted me who I really was, and I couldn't imagine who would be able to stop me.

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## CHAPTER 7

It was High Chaparral, like I use to say. It was a full circus, and I said all kinds of stupid stuff, like for example that the national team would have won EC 2000 with me! It was maybe cocky and fun back then, but I don't know, it did feel so smart when I really got picked for the NT. That was also in April. I recently had scored that goal against Djurgården, and the newspapers were all crazy. They had me on the news bill's all the time, and I guess that the people who were reading didn't exactly see me as the humble guy and I got anxiety because of that. Would the heavy guys, like Patrik Andersson and Stefan Schwarz, thing that I was some cocky shit?

It was one thing to be a star in Malmö FF. But come one, the national team was something else! There you had lads who had won a bronze medal in WC, and believe it or not, I knew that in Sweden you weren't supposed to show yourself too much, especially not when you're the new guy in a gang. Oh my God, I had my rough patches in the junior team, I wanted to be liked.

I wanted to get into the gang, but it didn't start off to well. We went to a training camp in Switzerland and the journalists where all over me all the time. It was almost embarrassing. Fuck, I wanted to say, Henke Larsson is over there, go to him instead, but still, I couldn't resist. On a press conference I Geneva they asked me if I reminded of any other big player in the world.



"No", I answered. "There's only one Zlatan", and how humble was that on a scale, and I felt right away, I have to make this right.

I tried to stay on the down low after that, and honestly, I didn't need to strain myself. I felt so shy before all the heavy names, and except from Marcus Allbäck, who was my roommate, I didn't talk to a lot of people. I stood on the side lines. "He's an odd person. He wants to be alone!" the newspapers wrote and sure, that sounded exciting. Like, the very interesting artist Zlatan.

But in reality I was only insecure, and I didn't want to piss off more people, especially not Henke Larsson, who was like a God to me! He was a pro in Celtic back then and that year, 2001, he got the Golden Shoe as the best goal scorer in Europe. Henke was really awesome, and it felt big when I heard that I was going to start with him in attack against Switzerland.

It was another one of those unreal things, before the game several newspapers made long reports about me. They wanted to really present me to people before my international debut, and in one of those articles some principal from Sorgenfri, you know that school where they wanted to give me an extra teacher, said that I was the messiest student she had in thirty-three years or something like that: I was the hooligan at Sorgenfri. A one man show. It was bla bla, but there were some other things as well, a lot of hopes that I would make a grand success in the national team. They wanted me as a hooligan and a star at the same time, and I felt the pressure.

But there was no success. I got substituted in the second half, and they didn't pick me for the important WC-qualifying games that year, against Slovakia and Moldavia. Lagerbäck and Söderberg went for Henke and Allbäck in attack instead, and that should have made me a bit more anonymous. I was even a starter in the team. But nothing worked like it should for me. I remember the first time I played with the NT in Stockholm. We were facing Azerbaijan in Råsunda (ed not: Sweden's national stadium), and I wasn't really in the gang yet. Stockholm was like another world for me. It was like New York. I was lost and insecure, and there were a lot of hot girls in that town. I just like looked around all the time.

I was going to start as a substitute, and Råsunda was packed, or almost packed. Thirty three thousand people were there, and all the big boys seemed confident and used to the whole thing, and I sat on the bench and felt like a little boy. But fifteen minutes in something happened. The crowd started shouting. They roared my name, and I can't explain, I got so pumped. I got goose bumps. All the heavy guys were out there. It was Henke, it was Olof Mellberg, it was Stefan Schwarz and Patrik Andersson. But they weren't screaming their names. They screamed mine, and I wasn't even playing. It was almost too much, and I didn't get it. What had I done, really?

Maybe only a couple of games in Allsvenskan! But I was still more popular than guys who had played in big championships and had bronze medals. It was crazy, and everyone in the team was looking at me. But I had no clue if they were happy for me or not. I just knew that they didn't get it either. This was something totally new. It hadn't happened before, and after a while the crowd started yelling "come on Sweden, come on", the regular cheers, and just then I started tying my shoes, just because I didn't have anything else to do or because I was nervous. It felt like a electric shock.

The crowd thought that I was going to warm up, and roared "Zlatan, Zlatan" again, all crazy now, and of course, I took my hands away from my shoe. I mean, I sat on the bench and to take over the show in that moment, would have been an overstep and I tried to make myself invisible. But I was enjoying it in secret. I felt a shiver. The adrenalin started pumping, and when Lars Lagerbäck actually asked me to warm up I rushed into the pitch, all happy, seriously. I was flying, it was "Zlatan, Zlatan" from the stands, and we were up two-zero and I made a lob with the back of my heel, one of those wonderful things from the block, and I got the ball back and scored, and all of Råsunda and the night shined up, and even Stockholm felt like my city.

It was just that: I took Rosengård with me. One time that year I was in Stockholm with the NT. We went to Undici, Tomas Brolin's nightclub, and we sat there all quiet. Then one of my friends from the ghetto started to nag me.

"Zlatan, Zlatan, can I get the key to you hotel room?"

"Why?"

"Just give it to me!"

"Alright, alright."

I gave it to him and didn't think more of it. But when I came home that night my friend was there and he had locked the door to the closet and looked all excited.

"What do you have in there?" I asked.

"Nothing special. And don't touch it", he answered.

"What?"

"We can make money from it, Zlatan!"

Do you know what it was? It was sick. It was a gang of Canada Goose jackets he had stolen from Undici. So honestly, I didn't always have the most serious company, and in Malmö FF things were up and down. It was a strange thing, to stay in a club when you're already sold to another, and I wasn't always the most harmonic guy. Sometimes I just flipped out. I exploded. Obviously I had always done that, but that's because the situation around me, and the bad boy thing got stuck to me now. When we faced Häcken I had been cautioned, and there was some anxiety in the air. Would that crazy Zlatan do something again?

Häcken had Torbjörn Nilsson as coach, the old superstar, and Kim Källström played in that team and I knew him from the National U21-team and the play was really dirty from the beginning, some time into the game I fouled Kim Källström from behind. I elbowed another guy and got a red card and then the real outbreak came. Towards the dressing rooms I kicked down a speaker and a microphone, and like, the sound technician who had put them up didn't really like that initiative. He called me an idiot, then I stopped and went towards him: Like who's the idiot?

But one of our guys came between us and there was a circus afterwards and lines in the newspapers and something like seven million advices from everyone: I have to change my ways, blab la. Or else things can go bad in Ajax... bullshit, bullshit! Expressen even interview a psychologist who meant that I should seek help, and I reacted immediately of course: Who the fuck is he? What does he know?

I didn't need a psychologist. I just needed peace and quiet. But it's true, it's wasn't fun sitting in the stands and watching IFK Göteborg humiliate us with six-zero when I was suspended. Our good run from the season opening disappeared and also our coach got some criticism, Micke Andersson. I really didn't have anything against him, and we really didn't have any close relationship. If I had any problem, I went to Hasse Borg.

But it was one thing that started irritating me. I believed Micke had too much respect for the elders in the team. He was afraid really, and he wasn't happy with me when I got another red card against Örebro. There was some tension and we were playing a game in training. It was summer then. Micke Andersson were the referee, and there was some confrontation with Jonnie Fedel, the goalkeeper, who was one of the oldest players in the team and of couse, Micke went with him, and I got a black out, and stepped up to Micke.

"You're afraid for the older players in the team, you're fucking afraid of ghosts as well", I shouted. There was a lot of balls on the pitch, and I started kicking them, buff, buff, buff. They flew away like projectiles and landed on the cars outside so that the alarms started going, and they really sounded and everything just stopped, and I stood there wild and ghetto cocky whilst the team mates were looking at me. Micke Andersson tried to calm me down, and I shouted to him:

"Are you my mother or what?"

I was furious and went to the dressing room and emptied my locker and took down my name and explained that I was never going to come back. It was enough! Bye bye MFF, thank you and good bye you idiots and I drove away in my Toyota Celica and didn't come to the trainings no more, just sat home and played Playstation and hanged around with my mates instead. It was like I was staying home from school, and of course Hasse Borg called and sounded hysteric.

"Where are you? Where are you? You must come back!"

And sure, I wasn't impossible. After four days I came back and was a good and charming boy again, and honestly, I didn't think my outbreak was all that really. These things happen in football, it belongs, and there's a lot of adrenalin in the sport. Besides I didn't have much time in the team left, I was on my way to

Holland, and I didn't think of any ridiculous penalties. I rather thought about how they would thank me. A couple of months ago there was a crisis in MFF. They needed ten million in the coffers, and they really didn't have any money to buy top players.

But now they were the richest club in Sweden, I had given them a big capital, and even Bengt Madsen, MFF president, had explained in the newspapers: "Only one player like Zlatan is born every fifty years!" So no, it wasn't all that strange that I thought they had planned some nice way to thank me good bye, or at least a "Thanks for the eighty five millions", especially not when they a week ago had celebrated Niclas Kindvall in front of thirty thousand spectators in the game against Helsingborg. But of course, I felt that they were all a bit afraid of me. I was the only one who could mess the deal with Ajax up by doing something even crazier, and in those days my last game in Allsvenskan was going to be played.

It was against Halmstad away and I wanted to give a nice good bye show to the crowd. It wasn't a big thing for me, trust me. I was done with Malmö. In my mind I was already in Amsterdam. But still, a time in my life passed by, and I remember that I looked at the list on the wall which had the line ups. Then I looked again.

My name wasn't there. I wasn't even going to sit on the bench, and of course, I understood. It was my punishment. It was Micke's way to show who the boss was, and alright, I accepted that, what else could I do? I didn't even get mad when he explained to the journalists that I was "under pressure and unbalanced" and "needed a rest", as if he had given me a rest just because he was such a good guy, and as a matter of fact, I was naive enough to think that the management still were planning something, maybe something with the supporters.

A short time afterwards I was called up to Hasse Borg's office, and you know, I don't like that. I always think that I'm going to be preached to. But back then so many things happened that I just went there without expecting anything, and in the office, Hasse Borg and Bengt Madsen stood there full of themselves, and I wondered, what happening now, is it a funeral?

"Zlatan, our time together is coming to an end."

"Don't tell me that you..."

"We want to tell..."

"So you're going to thank me goodbye in here?" I said and looked around.

We were in Hasse's boring fucking office, and there were three of us in there.

"So you're not doing it in front of the fans?"

"You know", Bengt Madsen said. "It's said that it brings bad luck to do it before a game."

I just looked at him. It brings bad luck?

"You thanked Niclas Kindvall in front of thirty thousand people, and that went well."

"Yeah, but..."

"But what?"

"We want to give you this gift."

"What the fuck is this?"

It was a ball, a ball out of cut glass.

"It's a memory."

"So this is your way of thanking me for the eighty five millions?"

What did they think? That I would have it in Amsterdam, and like cry when I saw it?

"We want to express our gratitude."

"I don't want it. You can keep it."

"You can't..."

I could. I put the ball on the table. And then I left. That was my goodbye from the club, nothing less or nothing more, and sure, I wasn't happy about it. But still, I shook it off. I mean, I was on my way out of there, and honestly, what was Malmö FF really? My real life was going to start now, and the more I thought of it, the bigger it became.

I wasn't just going to Ajax. I was their most expensive player, and Ajax may not have been Real Madrid or Manchester United, but it was definitely a big club. Just five years ago Ajax had played in a Champions League final. Six years ago they had won the whole tournament and Ajax has had guy's life Cruyff, Rijkaard, Kluivert, Bergkamp and van Basten, especially him, he had been really awesome, and I was

going to carry his shirt number. It wasn't real. I was going to score the goals and be decisive, and of course, it was awesome, but also, I got that more and more, there was one hell of a pressure.

No one puts out eighty five millions without wanting something back, and it was three years ago Ajax had won the league. For a club like Ajax that was a little scandal. Ajax is the nicest team in Holland and the supporter's demands big wins. You had to deliver and don't play around with some cocky style and punish yourself right away, definitely not start with "I am Zlatan, who are you?". I was going to try and float in and learn the culture, but it was just that: things still happened around me.

On my way home from Gothenburg, in Bottnaryd outside Jönköping, I was pulled over by the cops. I had flown past in one hundred ninety (ed note: km/h) on a seventy road apparently, not much of a speeding compared to what I was going to do later on. But they took my license and the newspapers didn't just put big headlines. They took the chance to bring up that Industrigatan incident again as well.

They made lists with my scandals and red cards and all that spread itself to Holland of course and even though the management probably knew about most of it already, the journalists in Amsterdam got started as well. Didn't matter how much I wanted to be a good boy, I became a bad boy before I even had begun. It was me and one other new guy, an Egyptian called Mido who recently made success in Belgian KAA Gent. Right away both of us got an reputation of being crazy heads, and if that wasn't enough I heard more and more about that coach I had met in Spain, Co Adriaanse.

He was supposed to be the biggest Gestapo who knew everything about his players, and there was some sick stories about his punishments; among them a story about a goal keeper who happened to answer his cell phone during a tactics meeting. His punishment was to be the operator of the club's telephone line during a whole day, without him being able to speak Dutch. It was like "Hello, hello, don't understand" all day, and then there was this thing with three guys from the junior team who had been out partying. They had to lie on the pitch while the other players walked over them with the studs on. It was a lot of that stuff, not that it bothered me.

There's always a lot of talk about the coach, and I had always liked guys with discipline. I get on well with guys who keep a distance to their players and don't come to close. That's how I've been raised. No one had been all: "Poor you little Zlatan, of course you're going to play." No dad had come to the trainings and kissed the coach's ass and demanded that they would be nice to me, not a chance. I had been on my own and I rather get yelled at and become enemy with the coach and get to play because I'm good, rather than being friends with him and get to play because he likes me.

I don't want any cutiecutie (ed note: Gulligull is the Swedish "word". It means being too nice). That makes me confused. I want to play football, nothing else. But of course... I was still nervous when I packed my bags and went there. Ajax and Amsterdam was something totally new. I didn't know squat about the city and I remember the flight and the landing and the woman from the club that came to meet me.

Her name was Priscilla Janssen. She was a factotum in Ajax and I really made my best to be pleasant, and I greeted the guy she had with him. It was a kid in my age that seemed shy, but talked English pretty good.

He was from Brazil, he said. He had played for Cruzeiro, a famous team, I knew that because Ronaldo had played there. Just like me he was new completely new in Ajax, and he had a long name that I didn't really get. But apparently I could call him Maxwell and we exchanged phone numbers and then Priscilla drove me in her Saab cabriolet to the little terrace house the club had arranged for me in Diemen, a little society far away from City, and there I sat with a bed from Hästens (ed note: a Swedish bed manufacturer. A famous one. Hästen means horse) and a sixty inch television and nothing else and played Playstation and wondered what was going to happen.

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## CHAPTER 8

Being on my own wasn't really a big thing. Growing up I had learned to take care of myself, and I still felt like the coolest kid in Europe, kind of.

I had become a pro and was sold for sick amounts. But my house was also empty. It felt far away and I didn't have any furniture that gave me a feeling of being in a home, and honestly, soon enough my fridge started to get empty as well. Not that I had the biggest panic because of it and had flashes of my childhood or anything. I was cool. I had empty fridges in my flat in Lorensborg as well. I was used to everything. But on the other hand in Malmö I had never had be hungry because of it, not only because I ate like an idiot in Kulan, the restaurant in MFF, and often stole some food with me under the overall, stuff that kept me on my feet at nights, but also because I had my mom and my friends.

In Malmö I didn't have to cook any food, or worry about empty fridges. But now in Diemen I was back on square one. It was ridiculous. I was going to be a serious guy. But I didn't even have cornflakes at home, and hardly a dime in my pocket, and I sat there in my house on my Hästen bed and called pretty much everyone I knew; friends, dad, mom, little brother and sis. I even called Mia, even though we had broken up: Like, can't you come over? I was lonely, restless and hungry and eventually I got a hold of Hasse Borg.

I figured that he could make a deal with Ajax, like loan me and make sure that Ajax paid back later. Mido had done something similar with his old club, I knew that. But it didn't work. "I can't do that", Hasse Borg said. "You have to be on your own" and that pissed me off.

He had sold me. Wasn't he going to help me in a situation like this?

"Why not?"

"It doesn't work like that."

"And where is my ten percent?"

I didn't get an answer, and got mad, but alright, I admit, I had myself to blame. I hadn't realised that it took a month before you get a pay check, and I had car problems. It was my Mercedes convertible. It had Swedish signs. I wasn't allowed to drive it in Holland. I had just gotten it, and the thought was to glide around in Amsterdam with it, but now I was forced to sell it and had ordered another Mercedes, a SL 55, and that didn't really make me richer.

That's why I now sat in Diemen, broke and hungry, and my dad told me that I was an idiot for buying such a car when I didn't have any money, and that was probably true. But I still didn't have any cornflakes at home, and I still hated empty fridges.

That's when I thought of that Brazilian guy at the airport. We were some new guys that season. It was me, it was Mido, and then it was him, Maxwell; I had hanged with them both, not just because all of us were new. I felt better around the black guys and South Americans. They were more fun, I felt, and more chill and not as jealous. The Dutch guys didn't want anything else than getting out of there and going to Italy or England and that's why they had an eye on each other all the time – like, who's closest? – Whilst the Africans and the Brazilians just were happy to be there. It was: Wow, do we get to play in Ajax? I felt more at home with them, and I liked the humour and the attitude. Maxwell was not like the other Brazilians though I was going to get to know. He was really no party animal, not a guy that needed to party his head off now and then, he was the opposite, he was incredibly sensitive, a family guy that called home all the time. But he was through and through a sympathetic guy, and it I should say something about him, is that he was to kind.

"Maxwell, I have a crisis", I said on the phone. "I don't even have cornflakes at home. Can I live with you?"

"Of course", he said. "Come right over."

Maxwell lived in Ouderkerk, a little society with only seven, eight thousand inhabitants, and I moved over to him and slept on a mattress on the floor for three weeks until I got my first pay check, and it wasn't a bad time. We cooked food together and talked about the training, the other players and our old lives in Brazil and Sweden. Maxwell talked English very good. He told me about his family and his two brothers

that were very close to him, I remember that because not much later one of those brother died in a car accident. It was extremely sad. I really like Maxwell.

At his house I got some discipline in me, and it started to get better after that. I got that fantastic feeling back, and I was really good in pre-season. I spit in goals against the amateur teams we played against, and did a lot of tricks, just like I thought I would. Ajax were famous for playing fun, technical football, and the papers wrote Oh, Oh, he seem to be worth his eighty five millions, like, what a player, and indeed I felt that Co Adriaanse was hard on me. But I thought it just was the type of guy he was. I had heard so much about him.

After every game he put grades on us, he highest was ten and once when I had scored a lot of goals he said: "You scored five goals, but you also threw away to passes. You get a five." Like alright, I get it, the demands are high. But I just continued, and sure enough, I didn't think anything would stop me now. I remember that I met a guy who didn't have a clue who I was.

"Are you any good?" he asked.

"Not me that should answer to that!"

"Do the opponent fans boo and whistle against you?"

"Hell yeah."

"Ok. They you're great", he said and that's something I haven't forgotten. Those who are sharp, they get boo's and bullshit. That's how it works.

At the of July the Amsterdam Tournament started. Amsterdam Tournament is a classic pre-season tournament In Holland at a high level, and that year would, apart from us, Milan, Valencia and Liverpool participate, and that was obviously really awesome. That was my chance to present myself for Europe, and I noticed right away, oh lord, this is something else than Allsvenskan. I Malmö I had all the time in the world on the ball. But now they were on me at once. Everything was so incredibly much faster.

In the first game we were facing Milan. Milan was in a rough patch for some time, but the club had dominated European football in the nineties and I really tried to not care about the fact that they had defenders like Maldini. I played rough and got a couple of free kicks, and cheers, and did some nice stuff. But it was tough and we lost by one-zero.

In the next game we were facing Liverpool. Liverpool had won three cup titles that year, and had maybe the strongest defence in Premier League with the Fin Sami Hyypiä and the Swiss Stéphane Henchoz. Henchoz had not only been sharp that year. He had done a thing that was talked about a great deal. In the FA-cup final he had blocked a shot on the goal line with his hand and that smartass trick that the referee didn't see had helped Liverpool to win. Both he and Hyypiä were on me like glue. But a bit into the game I fought to get the ball down the corner flag and went in towards the penalty area and there was Henchoz. He blocked me on the short side of the pitch, and I had of course many opportunities. I was pressed but I could make a cross or play to the defence or try to go at goal.

I tried to go at goal with a one footed trick, a cool thing that Ronaldo and Romario used to do a lot and that was one of the tricks that I saw in the computer as a junior and worked on hour after hour until I could do it in the sleep and did no longer had to think about. It just came naturally. It's called The Snake, because if it's done correctly it's like a snake that's meandering along your feet. But it's not an easy thing to do. The outside of your foot must be behind the ball and you have to push quickly to the right and then suddenly angle it to the left with the tip of your foot, and just get away, like, bam, bam, quick as hell, and with total control of the ball like it's glued around your foot, like hockey players with a puck.

I had used that trick many times in Malmö and in Superettan, but never against a world class defender like Henchoz that was the thing: I had already felt it against Milan, the atmosphere triggered me. It was much more fun to dribble against a guy like him, and now it just happened. It was svisch, svisch, pow, and Stéphane Henchoz flew towards the right. He didn't get with me at all and I rushed past him, and the whole Milan team who were sitting outside the pitch stood up and screamed. The whole Amsterdam Arena was screaming.

It was a full show and afterwards when the journalists surrounded me I said those words, and I promise, I never plan what I'm going to say. It just happens and it happened a lot back then before I was careful with media. "First I went to the left", I said, "and so did he. And then I went to the right and so did he. Then I went to the left again, and he went to buy hot dogs", and that was quoted everywhere, and it became a famous thing. They even made a commercial thing out of it and there was talk about Milan being interested in me. I was called the new van Basten and all that, and I felt like: Wow, I'm awesome. I'm the Brazilian from Rosengård, and really, it should have been the start of a great season.

But still... a bad time was coming, and in hindsight, there had been signals right from the start, of course the things I did, I wasn't behaving. I went home to often and started losing weight and look very thin, but it was also the coach, Co Adriaanse. He criticized me in public, not that much of a problem for now. It became much worse when he got fired. Then he said that I had something wrong in my head. Now in the beginning it was the same old usual stuff, which I played too much for myself, and I started to understand that even a thing like the trick against Henchoz would necessarily be appreciated in Ajax if it doesn't lead to something concrete.

It's more seen as a way to show off, and have fun with the audience instead of playing for the team. In Ajax they played with three attackers instead of two that I was used to. I was supposed to be in the middle. Not wander to the flanks and do my individual stuff. I was supposed to be a target player, who moved around up there and gathered balls and especially scored goals, and honestly, I started wondering if that technical, fun Dutch way of playing football even existed anymore. It was like they had decided to be more like the rest of Europe, but it wasn't easy to understand the signals.

There was a lot of new stuff, and I didn't understand the language and the culture and the coach didn't talk to me. He didn't talk to anyone. He was the biggest stone face. Just looking in his eyes felt wrong, and I lost my mojo. I stopped scoring goals, and then I had no use of my good pre-season, it was more the opposite. All those headlines and comparisons with van Basten were used against me, and they started to see me as a disappointment, a bad buy. I was replaced by Nikos Machlas in attack, a Greek I hanged around with a lot, and in these moments when I'm snubbed and lose form, it completely eats me up. What am I doing wrong? How can I get out of this?

That's the way I am.

I'm really not a person who walks around satisfied: Like wow, I'm Zlatan! It's the opposite, it's like a movie that is on all the time: Should I have done this or that? And then I watch others: What can I learn from them? What is it that I'm lacking? Every moment I think of my mistakes and my good stuff to for that matter. What can I do better? I always, always bring home with me something from the games and trainings, and obviously hard. I never get satisfied, not even when I should, but it helps me develop, it was just that: in Ajax I got stuck in those thoughts, and I had no one to talk to, not really.

I talked with the walls at my place and thought that people were idiots, and of course, I called home and moaned. But still I will never really blame anyone else. It just felt sluggish, and I didn't feel so good. It was like I couldn't stand the life in Holland, and I went to Beenhakker and asked: "What does the coach has to say about me? Is he satisfied, or what is it?" And Beenhakker, he's another type than Co Adriaanse, he doesn't just want to have obedient soldiers.

"It's cool. It's going well. We have patience with you", he answered.

But I was longing for home, and I didn't feel appreciated, not by the coach nor the journalists, and especially not by the fans. Those Ajax supporters can't be messed with. They're used to winning, it's like: What the hell, you only won by three-zero?

When we got a draw against Roda they threw stones and bottles at us, and I had to stay in the arena and seek shelter. It was a lot of shit all the time and instead of all that "Zlatan, Zlatan" that I've also heard in the beginning in Ajax, I now got boo's, and not by the opponent fans. That would have been normal, but now it was our own fans, and that was rough. It was: What the hell is this?

But at the same time, you have to accept the situation in this sport, and somewhere I understood them. I was the biggest investment of the club. I wasn't really supposed to be a substitute. I should be the new van Basten and score goal after goal, and I tried my best. I tried too much, to be honest.

A football season is long, and you can't really show everything in one game. But that was what I was trying to do. As soon as I came in I wanted to show it all at the same time, and that's why I got stuck, I believe. I wanted too much, and therefore it wasn't enough, and I guess that I hadn't learned to handle the pressure yet, after all. Those eighty five millions were starting to feel like a damn backpack, and I sat often alone in my house in Diemen.

I had no idea what the journalists thought of me back then, many probably imagined that me and Mido were out partying all night. But in reality I sat at home playing video games, day and night, and if we were free on a Monday, I flew home on Sunday night and got back with the six o'clock flight on Tuesday morning and went straight to practice. There was no night clubs, nothing like that, but I wasn't really being a professional. Honestly, I was very unprofessional, and I didn't sleep well or eat well and did a lot of crazy stuff in Malmoe. I played with airbomb's and such, firework bombs that we threw into gardens, it was a lot of stuff to get adrenalin rushes'. There was a lot of crazy car rides because that's how I work. If nothing is happening in football, I have to get my kicks in some other way. I need action, I need speed, and I wasn't behaving.

I continued losing weight, and as a target in Ajax I was supposed to fight and be tough. But I was down at seventy five kilo, or less even. I was really thin, and I was probably worked out. I didn't have any vacation. I have had two pre-season in six months, and the diet, what do you think? I ate garbage. I still couldn't do anything else than toast bread and boil macaronis, and all that positive flow from the papers had disappeared. It was no "Success for Zlatan again". It was "Zlatan was booed", "He's out of balance". He's this and that, and then they were talking about my elbows. There was so much fucking talk about them.

It started in a game against Groningen where I elbowed a defender in the neck. The referee didn't see anything, but the defender fell on the floor and was carried out of the pitch on a stretcher, and they said that he had a concussion. When he came in after the break he was still kind of groggy, but the worst thing is, the FA studied the incident and decided to suspend me for five games.

That wasn't really what I needed, it was shit, and no one can say that I started out well after the suspension. I elbowed a new guy in the neck, and of course, he was carried out on a stretcher as well. It was like I had started some new stupid thing, and even though I didn't get a suspension that time I didn't get to play much after that, and it was rough, and the fans didn't become much happier, you could really say that, and I called Hasse Borg. It was an idiotic thing to do, but that's what you do in hopeless situations.

"Damn, Hasse, can't you buy me back?"

"Buy you back? Are you serious?"

"Take me away from here. I can't handle it."

"Come on, Zlatan, there's no money for that, you must understand that. You have to have patience."

But I was tired of having patience, I wanted to play more, and I was so homesick, it was crazy. I still felt completely lost, and once again I started to call Mia, not that I knew if it was her or anyone else I missed. I was lonely and wanted my old life back. But what did I get? I got a new set back.

It started with me finding out that I was making the least money in the team. I had that feeling for a while, and eventually I knew. I was the most expensive guy, but my salary was the lowest. I was bought to be the new van Basten. But I didn't make any money, and I mean: What was the reason of that? It was so hard to figure it out.

You remember Hasse Borg's words: "Agents are thieves" and that, and like a damn lightning I understood: he had fooled me. He acted like he was on my side, but in reality he only worked for Malmö FF and the more I thought of it, the angrier I became. Right from the start Hasse Borg had made sure that no one came between us, no one that could represent my interests. That's why I had to stand there in Hotel S:t Jörgen like fool in my training overall and let the suits with their educations in economy fool me,



and it felt like a punch in the stomach. Get it right now! Money has never been the big thing for me, but to be let down and used, to be seen as the most stupid falafel boy that you can fool and make money off, that made me mad, and I went for it. I called Hasse Borg.

"What the fuck is this? I have the worst contract in the whole club."

"What are you talking about?"

He was playing stupid.

"And where's my ten percent?"

"We've put them in insurance's in England."

In an insurance? What the fuck was that? It didn't tell me anything, and I explained alright, insurance, a plastic bag with money, in a bucket in the desert.

"I want my money now."

"I can't", he said.

The money was bound, they had planned it on some kind of way I didn't understand, and I decided to go to the bottom of it. I got me an agent, because I had understood so much: agents aren't thieves. Without an agent you don't stand a chance. Without help you just stand there and get made by the suits again, and via a friend I got hold of a guy called Anders Carlsson who worked at IMG in Stockholm.

He was alright; there was no speed in him though. He was one of those guys who never spat his gum to the street or crosses the line but still want to act kind of tough like that, without it being natural. But, Anders really helped me a lot during the first time. He got me those insurance's, but then came the next chock. It was no longer ten percent of the money. It said eight percent and I asked:

"What is this?"

They had paid something they called a pretax on the salary, I was told, and I thought: What is this shit? Pretax on salary! I've never heard of it, and I said right away: This can't be right. It's a new trick, and would you believe it? Anders Carlsson looked into it, and got me my two percent. Suddenly there was no pretax on salary anymore, and then it all fell down, I was done with Hasse Borg. It became a lesson I will never forget. It honestly branded me, and don't think for a second that I don't have any clue about my money and terms today.

When Mino called a while ago he asked:

"What did you get for your book from Bonniers?" (ed note: the company that is releasing the book.)

"I don't really know."

"Bullshit! You know exactly how much", and of course, he was right.

I have total control. I refuse to be used and fooled again, and I always try to stay one step ahead in negotiations. What are they thinking? What do they want, and what's their secret tactic? And then I remember. Stuff stays in my head, and sure, Helena usually says that I shouldn't dwell so much: Like, "I'm tired of hating Hasse Borg."

But no, I don't forgive him, not a chance. You don't do that to a guy from the suburbs who don't know anything about stuff like this. You don't pretend to be an extra dad when you're trying to find every possible way to fool him. I had been the guy in the junior team who no one believed in, I was the one who was expected to be the last one to be brought up to the senior team. But then... when I was sold for big money, the attitude was something else. Then they wanted to milk me for every dime. One moment I hardly existed, and in the next I was going to be used. I don't forget that, and I often think: Would Hasse Borg have done the same thing if I was a nice guy with dad who was a lawyer?

I don't think so, and already then in Ajax I talked about it. I said something like: He should watch himself. But I guess that he didn't really get it, and later on in his book he wrote that he was my mentor, he was the man that had taken care of me. It was just that: I believe he got it later on. Because we met in a elevator a couple of years ago. In Hungary. I was there with the national team, and stepped into the elevator, and on the fourth floor we stopped and from out of nowhere he stepped in. He was in town for some kiss ass trip, and was tying his tie and then he saw me. Hasse is a lot of: "Well well, hello, hello, how's it going?", that style, and he said something and put his hand out.

He didn't get a movement back, nothing, just ice-cold and black eyes and of course, he got all nervous. He just stood there, psyched, and I didn't say a word. I just watched him, and down in the lobby I just went out and left him there behind me. That's our only meeting since then, so no, I don't forget. Hasse Borg is a person I can split into two parts, and then in Ajax it hurt me. I felt fooled and violated, I had the worst pay check, and our own fans were booing me. It was this and that. It was the elbows. It was shit, there were lists with my mistakes, the cop thing in Industrigatan for the hundred times, and so I was out of balance, it was said. They missed the old Zlatan. It was a lot of talk day after day, and the thoughts were grinding in me.

I looked for solutions every hour, every minute, because no, I wouldn't give up, not a chance. I'm not raising having it good, many people forget that. I'm not talent who has danced my way into Europe. I'm fought against the tide. Parents and coaches have been against me from the very beginning, and a lot of the stuff that I've learned, I've learned on the contrary of what others have said. That Zlatan only dribbles, they've moaned. He's this and that, he's wrong. But I've continued, I've listened, I haven't listened, and now in Ajax I really tried to understand the culture and learn how they thought and played.

I wondered what I could do better. I worked hard and tried to learn from others. But at the same time, I didn't abandon my style. No one would take away the main soul of my game, not that I was defiant or fussy, I just kept on fighting, and when I fight on the pitch, I can look aggressive. That's a part of my temperament. I demand as much as others that I demand from myself. But apparently I bugged Co Adriaanse. I was a difficult person, he said later on, full of himself: I just did my thing, bla bla bla and of course, he can say whatever he want; I'm not going for revenge. I accept the situation. The coach is the boss. I can only say that I really tried to get a spot.

But it wouldn't give in. Nothing happened, except that we heard Co Adriaanse was going to get fired, and that was good news, after all. We had just got beaten by Henke's Celtic in the qualifier for Champions League and against FC Copenhagen in the UEFA-cup, but I don't think it was the results that got him fired. We were doing well in the league. He went because he couldn't communicate with the players. No one had any contact with him. We had been living in a vacuum, and it's true, I like tough guys, and Co Adriaanse was really tough. But he went over the line, there was no point in his dictator type of way, no sense of humour, no nothing, and we were all curious: Who's coming next?

There was some talk about Rijkaard, and that sounded good, not because a great player automatically becomes a great coach, but still, with van Basten and Gullit, Rijkaard had been legendary in Milan. But Koeman became the coach, and I knew that guy as well, he had been a fantastic free kick taker in Barcelona. He had Ruud Krol with him, another great player, and I noticed right away, they understood me much better, and I started hoping that everything would become better.

But it got worse. I was benched five games in a row and on one of the trainings Koeman sent me home. "You're not there", he yelled. "You're not giving it all. You have to go home." Sure, I got out of there; I had my minds somewhere else. It wasn't a big thing, but sure, there were big headlines. Even Lars Lagerbäck (ed note: Swedish national coach at the time) talked in the papers about how worried he was for me, the talks were that I was going to lose my NT spot, and that wasn't fun, not at all.

There was going to be a WC in Japan that summer, and that was something I had been living for a long time. And I also got worried that my shirt, number nine in Ajax, would be taken away from me, not that I really cared though. I don't give a shit what's written on the back. But it would be a sign that they didn't have any trust in me. In Ajax they talked a lot about numbers all the time. Number ten must do this. Number eleven that, and nothing was as great as the number nine, van Basten's old one. It was an honour to carry it, and if you didn't cut it they would take it away from you, that's how it worked, and now it was said that I didn't provide anything, and sadly, they had a point I guess.

I had only scored five goals in the league. It became a total of six and mostly I sat on the bench and got more boo's from our own supporters. When I was warming up to come in they screamed: "Nikos, Nikos, Machlas, Machlas". It didn't matter how bad he was, they didn't want me in. They wanted him, and I thought: Shit, I haven't even started playing, but they're already against me. If I had a bad pass they raged up there, boos or the same old shit again: "Nikos, Nikos, Machlas, Machlas." It wasn't enough that I

wasn't playing good. I had to put up with that thing as well, and sure, it looked like we were winning the league.

But I really couldn't be happy about it. I hadn't been a part of it for real, and it couldn't be hidden anymore. We were too many players on my position in the team. One of us had to go and it looked like it was going to be me, I had that feeling, and it was often said that I was target player number three, after Machlas and Mido. Even Leo Beenhakker, my friend, went out in Dutch media:

"Zlatan is often the player who starts our attacks. But he can't finish in front of the goal", and he added: "If we're going to sell him, we'll of course help him to get to a good club."

It was in the air, and more and more of those statements came. Koeman himself said: "Zlatan is by quality our best attacker, but to make it as number nine in Ajax you have to have other characteristics as well. I doubt that he can get them", and really the war headlines came: "Answer tonight", it said. "Zlatan is on the market!" and it felt, trust me; it was like I was going to be busted as the overhyped diva, after all.

I hadn't lived up to the expectations. It was my first real set back. But I refused to give up. I would show them. That thought went around in my head, day and night, and honestly, I had to, regardless if I was getting sold or not. I had to show that I was good no matter what. It's was just that: how would I do that when I wasn't getting any playing time? It was a fox trap. It was hopeless and I sat and jumped on the bench: Are they stupid or what? It was like the junior team in MFF.

That spring we qualified to the final of the Dutch cup. We were facing Utrecht at De Kuip in Rotterdam, the same arena where the EM-final had been held two years earlier, and there was a massive pressure from the stands. It was the twelfth May 2002. There was fires and stuff and roars in the stands. For Utrecht, Ajax is the big enemy. No team is more important to beat, and the fans where crazy filled with hatred and wanted revenge after our league victory. You could really feel it, and for us it was an opportunity to grab the double and show that we were back after some hard years. But of course, I was hardly going to get any playing time now either.

I was on the bench the whole first half and most of the second and watched Utrecht score two-one with a penalty and trust me, it felt. We lost our wings whilst the Utrecht fans got wild and crazy and not far away from me Koeman was unhappy in his suit and red tie. He looked like he had given up. Let me play then, I thought, and in the seventy eight minute I got in. Something had to happen and of course, I was eager. I was pumped and wanted to do everything at once like usual that year, and we were on them all the time, but the minutes went on and it looked like we were going to lose. We couldn't put it in and I remember that I had a shot that really thought would go in, but it hit the bar.

We were on stoppage time and it looked hopeless. There wasn't going to be any Cup-victory and the Utrecht fans were cheering in the stands. You could see their red banners in the whole arena, and you heard their songs and roars and you could see their fires, and there was thirty seconds left. Then a low cross came into the penalty area and passed several Utrecht defenders and found Wamberto, one of the Brazilians in our team, and he was probably offside, but the linesman didn't see it, and Wamberto put his foot on it and score, it was insane. We were saved in the dying moments of the stoppage time, and the Utrecht fans couldn't believe it, they were a mess. But it wasn't over yet.

It went to extra time, and many extra time's in the cups back then were decided by a golden goal or sudden death like they call it in hockey, and that was what was going to happen now. The team that scored a goal would win the game at once, and just five minutes into the extra time another cross came in, this time from the left, and I jumped up and headed it and short afterwards I got the ball again. I took it down on my chest, I was really pressured, but I could fire a shot with my left, not a good shot, not at all. The ball bounced on the grass. But oh my God, it was well put and it went in and I took my shirt of and rushed out to the left, all crazy with happiness and skinny as hell. You could see my ribs. It had been a rough year. There had been one hell of a pressure and my game wasn't good during long periods of time. But now I was back. I had made it. I had showed them all, and the whole arena was crazy. It really vibrated of happiness and disappointment, and I especially remember Koeman, he ran towards me and shouted in my ear:

"Thank you very much! Thank you very much"

It was such a joy, it can't be explained, I just ran around there with the team and just felt how every tension let go.

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Back in Rosengård



## CHAPTER 9

I was a typical fucking jugge [ed note: swedish street lingo for an immigrant Yugoslav], she thought, with a gold watch and fancy car and I played music too loud, I definitely wasn't someone for her. But I didn't know anything about that.

I thought I was cool as hell, and I was sitting there in my Mercedes SL outside the Forex exchange by the central station in Malmö, while my kid brother, Keki, was inside exchanging cash. The season was over in Holland, and it might have been before or after the World Cup in Japan, I don't know, it doesn't matter, there I was and this chick ran out of a cab furious as hell. She was angry about something.

I thought: who the fuck is that?

I had never seen her before, and I had Malmö more or less under control. I had been there as soon as I had the chance and I thought I knew everything about the place. But that girl... where had she been? She wasn't only good looking. She had an awesome attitude, like "don't mess with me", and she was older,

and that was exciting. So I asked around: Who is she? What girl is that? From a friend I found out her name was Helena. Ok, Helena, I thought. Helena. I couldn't get her out of my mind.

But nothing more came out of that. There was so much happening around me, and I was restless and moved on, nothing really stuck, but one day I went to Stockholm again with the national team, and that city, I mean, where do all the fancy babes come from? It's insane, they are everywhere, and me and some friends went to Café Opera, and of course, there was commotion, and as always I was scanning the scene with that eye I've grown up with: are there any problems coming? Is someone picking a fight? There's always something.

But those days were better. This was before everyone started taking pics with their cell phones, and most don't even ask. They just fire a shot in your face, and sometimes I get furious. But this time, I was just looking around I suddenly I spotted her, like wow!, that's the girl from Forex and I went up to her and started talking: Hey, hey, are you also from Malmö, and she said her things, I work there and there, and I couldn't understand anything. Such career things I just couldn't grasp back then, and I was probably pretty arrogant. I had that style when was out back then.

I didn't want anyone to get too close. But I regretted it afterwards, I should have been more polite, and I was happy when I saw her in Malmö again. I started seeing her everywhere. She had a black Mercedes SLK, and it was often parked at Lilla Torg, and I often cruised past that place. By this time I didn't have the Mercedes SL anymore, but a red Ferrari 360.

The whole city knew I had one. It was like "Look, there's Zlatan", and for sure, if I wanted to hide, the car wasn't the best idea. But you should know that the guys who sold me the Mercedes said promised: You'll be the only one in Sweden with it! It was sales talk bullshit. I saw another one just like it that summer and immediately thought: Fuck them. I don't want that car anymore, so I called someone who sold Ferraris and asked: Do you have one available? Sure, they said, so I went there and picked one up, and left the SL as part of the payment. It was stupid, I made a loss and my finances weren't great at that time. But I didn't care.

I was proud of my cars, it was a thing of principle, and that's why I cruised around in my Ferrari feeling cool, and sometimes I'd see her in her black Mercedes, the girl Helena, and I was thinking, like: I have to do something about this, I can't just sit here and watch, so from a friend I got her mobile number, and I thought about it for a while. Should I call her?

I sent a text message, like "Hey, what's up? I think you've seen me a few times", and ended with the signature: "The guy with the red one", the guy with the red Ferrari, and wow, I got a reply, "The girl with the black one", she wrote, and I was thinking this could be the start of something, what did I know?

I called her and we met nothing special at first, we had lunch a few times, and I came with her to her mansion outside of town, and checked out all her interior design things, the wallpapers, the fireplaces and all those things, and honestly, all those things impressed me. It was something completely new. I had never met a single girl who lived like that, and I guess I really didn't understand what she was doing. She was working with marketing in some way at Swedish Match, but I understood she had a great status and reputation in her line of work, and I liked it.

She was nothing like the younger girls I'd met. Nothing was hysterical, not at all, she was tough. She liked cars. She had left home when she was seventeen and worked her way up, and it wasn't like I was some kind of superstar to her, or like she said: "You're not exactly Elvis who's landed." I was just a crazy kid to her, who dressed ugly and was totally immature, and sometimes it'd annoy her.

Evil super bitch deluxe, I would answer, or Evil**superbitchdeluxe** in one word, in one breath, because she was running around in the baddest stiletto heels wearing tight jeans and furs that whole thing. She was like Tony Montana in "Scarface", but a girl, and I was walking around in my tracksuits again. The whole deal was so wrong it felt good in a way, and we had a blast together. "Zlatan, you're so fucked up. You're hilarious", she said, and I was hoping she really meant it. I felt good around her.

But still, she came from a nice ordinary Swedish family in Lindesberg, the kind of family where you say "Dear, can you please pass me the milk", when we as I said, more or less threatened to kill each other at the dinner table, and many times I didn't even understand what she was saying, and I didn't know anything about her world, and she knew nothing about mine. I was eleven years younger and lived in Holland and was a maniac with criminal friends. It wasn't like a perfect match.

When me and some friends went down to Båstad that summer we tried getting into a party she had arranged with all sorts of celebrities and big shots during the "tennis week" the door guys wouldn't let us in. At least they didn't want to let my friends in, and it became sort of a circus. There was stuff happening all the time.

I played a national team game in Riga for example and landed in Stockholm late at night and I took a cab to Scandic Park Hotel with Olof Mellberg and Lars Lagerbäck. We hadn't played a great game. We only reached 0-0 against Latvia in the World Cup qualifier and I always have problems sleeping after games, especially when I haven't played well. My mistakes are like buzzing inside of me, so me and some friends decided to go downtown and check out Spy Bar at Stureplan. It was late and I went up some stairs.

But I hadn't been there for long before a girl came up to me and she was being very offensive, and sure, I had my friends nearby. If you see me on the town you can be certain I always have some friends close. Not just because the chaos that usually surrounds me. I have that character thing. I often end up with the bad guys. We're like drawn to each other, and that doesn't bother me at all. They're as nice as anyone else. But of course, things can heat up, and this girl, she came too close and said something stupid, she started provoking, and all of a sudden her brother was there too, touching and pulling me, he shouldn't have.

You don't mess with my friends. One of them took the brother and another one the girl, and I felt it immediately, no, I don't want to be part of this. I wanted to get out, but it was the first time I was at Spy Bar, it was late and crowded, and I couldn't find my way.

I ended up in the bathroom instead, and over where I had been there was complete chaos and I became stressed. I had played a national team game. This is gonna result in headlines, I thought, this will be a scandal, and then one of the doormen appeared and wasn't as nice anymore.

"The owner wants you to leave the place."

"Tell that pig I want nothing else", I said, and he and some other guys walked me out, and I left.

It was half past three in the morning apparently, I know that, because a security camera took pictures of me, and what do you think happened? Did they handle those pictures with secrecy and all that? Not really. It ended up in Aftonbladet and all the front pages, and you wouldn't believe it, it was like I had killed seven people. The papers were screaming about the thing, and they said I was charged with harassment. Harassment? Can you believe it? Fucked up, and as always, someone who had touched me became a media celeb.

I went back to Amsterdam. We were playing against Lyon in the Champions League, and I refused talking to the press. Mido was out there speaking for me instead. We, the problem kids had to help each other. But seriously, that was enough of it, and it didn't surprise me at all when we found out that Aftonbladet were the ones who had made sure that girl pressed charges, and I said publicly: I'm going to get that paper. I will sue them. But what do you think? I didn't get shit, only an apology, and I became more on guard after that. I was changing.

There had been too many bad things in the media, and sure, I had never only wanted crap like: Zlatan is training, Zlatan is good, Zlatan is behaving. Not at all. But now the line was crossed, and I wanted some attention for my football again. It had been a while since there was something positive about that.

Also the World Cup had been a disappointment. I had so high expectations, and for a while it didn't seem like I would play there at all. But Lagerbäck and Söderberg finally picked me and I liked them both, especially Söderberg of course, the teddy bear of the team. During one practice I lifted him up in the air

out of pure joy. I broke two of his ribs. He could barely walk, but he was a cool dude. I shared room with Andreas Isaksson. Andreas was the third goalie back then, a good guy, I guess. But seriously, his habits! He went to sleep at nine in the evening, and there I was and of course my mobile rang, it was like "Yeah, great, finally someone to talk to!" But Andreas just snorted and I hung up. I didn't want to bother him. I'm a nice guy, really. But the next night the phone rang again around the same time and he was sleeping again, or pretended to.

"But what the fuck, Zlatan", he hissed, and then I bit back, I mean what the fuck is that? Sleeping at nine o'clock?

"If you open your mouth again I will throw your bed out the window." That was apparently a good line, not because we lived on the twentieth floor, but because it had effect.

The next day I got my own room, so nice, but a part from that I didn't have any success personally. We were in the "group of death", as it was called, with England, Argentina and Nigeria, and it was such an atmosphere, great stadiums, perfect pitches, and I wanted to get in there and play more than ever before. But they thought I was too inexperienced. So they benched me. Still I was voted man of the match in a phone poll. Crazy! I was voted best in the game although I didn't even play. It was that old Zlatan fever again, and I only played five minutes against Argentina and short bit in the round of 16 against Senegal when I actually had some good chances. No, I thought Lars and Tommy used the same lineup too much and didn't give us, the new players, enough opportunities. But that was the way it was and I left and went back to Amsterdam.

I had a strategy. I wouldn't care about what others said and only do my thing. That was my goal, but it didn't help, not at first. It started like it had ended - on the bench. The fight about the spots in attack was hard, and I had some critics, one of them was Johan Cruyff, who always has been talking shit about me, and already at that time had opinions on my technique.

But other things happened too; Mido, my friend, publicly said that he wanted to be sold, not very smart, honestly he wasn't much of a diplomat, he was like me, or even worse. Later, when he had been on the bench against Eindhoven, he came into the dressing room and called everyone pussies. He was going on and about and there weren't any pretty words and I answered that if anyone was a pussy, he was, so he took a pair of scissors from a table and threw them at me, totally crazy to say the truth. The scissors flew by my head, straight into the tile wall which cracked, and of course, I stood up and gave him a slap, a punch. But after ten minutes we walked out, arm in arm, and a long time later I found out that our team manager had saved those scissors as a souvenir, like something he could show the kids, like Zlatan was almost hit by this in his face.

Anyway, it was a bit up and down with Mido, and now he had fucked up again. Koeman fined him and put him in the freezer, and there was this other guy, his name was Rafael van der Vaart, a Dutch, quite an arrogant guy, like many of the white guys on the team, even if he wasn't upper-class or anything. He had grown up in a trailer and lived a gypsy life, as he called it, and started playing football in the street with beer bottles as goal posts and he claimed that had sharpened his technique. He had joined the Ajax youth academy when he was only ten, and trained hard, and sure, he had become good. The year before he had been named European talent of the year or something like that. But he tried being a tough guy and he wanted to be seen and wanted to be a leader, and already in the beginning there was like a competition between us two.

Now he had injured his knee, and with both him and Mido away I would start against Lyon. It was my Champions League debut - I had only played in the qualifiers before - and of course that was cool. Champions League had been a dream for me and the atmosphere at the stadium was fucking amazing. I had brought down a bunch of friends and gotten them great tickets, and I remember that I got a pass early in the game from Jari Litmanen, the Finnish guy. I liked him.

Litmanen had played for Barcelona and Liverpool and just recently come to us, and he immediately had an inspiring effect on me. A lot of guys in Ajax were just playing for themselves. All they wanted was to be sold to a bigger club, and if often felt like they were more competing with each other than the other teams. But Litmanen really was a team player. He stood for the real deal, I thought, and when he gave me the

ball I ran down the sideline and was met by two defenders, one in front of me and one to the right. I had been in situations like that many times, and analyzed them back and forth.

It was kind of the same situation as against Henchoz against Liverpool, but there were two guys now, and I did a two foot dribble to the left, and both defenders were all over me. It looked like a dead end, but then I saw an opening between them, like a narrow corridor, and even before I had time to think about it I was through and came in front of the goal and saw another opening and made a shot, a low strike that hit the post and went in, and I went crazy.

It wasn't just a goal, it was beautiful too, and I ran like crazy towards my friends on the side and cheered with them, and the whole team was after me, totally crazy, and not long after that I scored another goal. It was insane, really. Two goals in my Champions League debut, and rumors began about Roma wanting me, Tottenham too actually.

I was on a go, and normally when the football is going great, there isn't a single problem in the world. But I had a bad time privately. I hadn't adapted to life down there. I was sort of like in a vacuum. I was at home too much and did stupid things, and I stayed in contact with Helena, mostly through text messages, without really knowing what I was doing. Was it just a crazy thing, or was it something else?

We played a Euro qualifier at Råsunda against Hungary in October. It felt great to be back. I hadn't forgotten the chanting from the year before, but we didn't begin well, and some of the Stockholm newspapers wrote that I was just an overrated guy who just elbowed my way ahead. It was an important game. If we lost the dream of the Euros could be gone, and both me and the rest of the national team had a lot to prove. But Hungary scored already after four minutes, and it didn't seem to matter how many chances we created. We just couldn't score, and it felt like a lost game and in the seventy-fourth minute Mattias Jonson made a high pass and I went up to head it. The goalie threw himself over me and tried to knock the ball away, but I don't know if he hit the ball. He knocked me out anyway, and everything went black. I fell to the ground.

I was gone for five or ten seconds and when I woke up the players were standing in a circle around me and I didn't understand anything: What's happening? What's going on? There was a roar from the audience and the guys looked both happy and concerned.

"It was a goal", Kim Källström said.

"Really? Who scored?"

"You did it, with your head."

I felt ill and dizzy and they brought in a stretcher which I laid down on. The team doctor was there and they carried me out, and then I heard the chanting again: "Zlatan, Zlatan." The entire stadium was on their feet, screaming, and I waved at them. It lifted me, and got the whole team going. OK, we only got 1-1 and we should have won. Kim Källström had a clear penalty during the final minutes but the ref chose not to see it. But I remember that thing, feeling so bad and so good at the same time, and soon afterwards I got sick in another way, the worst kind of fever which hit 250,000 people in Sweden and at that time another unexpected thing happened which changed a lot.

It was the day before Christmas Eve. I was at mom's place. The beginning of the season hadn't been great, but I was quite pleased, despite everything. I had scored five goals in the Champions League, actually more than in the dutch league, and I remember Koeman saying to me: "Hey you, Zlatan, there is a league as well", but I was working like that somehow. A better opponent triggered me and anyway, now I was at home in Rosengård.

We were off until the beginning of January when we were going on training camp and were playing a game in Cairo, and I really needed to rest. But it was crowded at mom's, and people were yelling and making noise and fought all the time. There was no peaceful place anywhere. It was me, mom, Keki and Sanela, and we used to spend Christmas like everyone else, a simple Christmas dinner at four o'clock and then opening gifts, and definitely, it could have been really nice. But I couldn't take that now. I had headaches and my body hurt. I needed to get away and get some peace, or at least talk with someone outside the family. It was just that: who could I call?



Everyone has their thing during Christmas. It's a sacred time. But maybe Helena? I tried. Not that I was hoping for much. She was working all the time and probably she was with her parents in Lindesberg. But no, she picked up, she was at her house. She said she didn't like Christmas.

"I feel bad", I said.

"You poor thing"

"I can't handle the circus at home!"

"Come over here then", she replied. "I'll take care of you", and honestly, that was a bit surprising.

We had mostly met for coffee and sent a lot of text messages before, I still hadn't spent the night at her place, but of course, that sounded perfect, so I left: "Sorry mom", kind of, "I have to leave."

"So now you're not even spending Christmas with us either?"

"Sorry", and out there on the countryside Helena put me to bed, and it was calm and quiet outside, exactly what I needed. It was really nice, and it didn't feel strange at all spending Christmas with her instead of the family. It was natural and exciting at the same time. But I didn't get well.

I was quite wasted, and next day was Christmas Eve, and I had promised my dad to come by. Dad doesn't celebrate Christmas. He's alone, sitting doing his own things. Him and me had an amazing relationship since that day on field one in Malmö. The whole deal from childhood with him not caring was gone, and he had come down and watched games several times, and partly as a homage to him I had switched from Zlatan to Ibrahimovic on my shirt. But then he was totally drunk again and I couldn't handle it, not for one second, so I went straight back to Helena.

"Are you back already?"

"I'm back."

That was more or less all I had the energy to say. Then I got really sick, like a 41 degree fever. I promise. I have never been in such a shitty condition. It was a super flu. I was wasted for three days and Helena had to shower me and change the sheets which were all sweaty, and I was dizzy and mumbling and whining, and there was something about that. I don't know. But until that moment I had been the cocky "juggle" to her. The guy acting mafia with fancy cars, and was kind of fun, at least I hoped so, but who not really was the guy for her.

Now I was all broken down, like a wreck, and she liked that somehow, she says. I became human. My fancy front cracked, and when I became a bit better she went and rented a bunch of movies, and it was the first time I watched Swedish crime films like "Beck", and it was sort of like an awakening for me. It was like wow, can Sweden make stuff like this! I was totally hooked and we sat there together and watched film after film and had a very nice time, not that we became a couple at once, not at all.

She came and left during those days. She went to work and came back and took care of me, and absolutely, sometimes we wouldn't understand each other, and we still didn't know what we wanted and we were still so totally different and wrong, and whatever else there was. But that's when it began, I think so, it felt great hanging with her, and when I got back to Holland I really missed her. Can't you come down here? I said, and she did. She visited me in Diemen. It was nice. But no one can say she was impressed by my small house. By then I had started liking it out there and I made sure the fridge was full.

But she claims she had to scrub my floors, and that there was a total mess everywhere and that I only had three plates at home and they were all mismatched, and the walls were insane, purple, yellow and peach-coloured in a weird mix and that the green carpeting didn't go with anything and that everything was a disaster. And of course, I dressed like a loser, and only was in bed playing video games, and there were cords and shit everywhere, and no order anywhere. Evil super bitch, I said.

Evil super bitch deluxe, in one breath.

I missed her when she left, and I started calling and texting more often, and I think I calmed down a bit. Jesus, this was a girl with class. She taught me things, like what do knives and forks for fish look like, and how you drink wine! By that time I thought you'd drink expensive wines like milk. But no, no, no, apparently you'd sit there sipping it slowly. I started getting it. But sure, just because of that I hadn't become easy. I continued going back to Malmö all the time, and not just to make out.

One day me and some friends came to Helena's house and span around on her gravel paths, and she went crazy and screamed that they had been raked and made nice and that everything had been ruined now, and of course, I got a bad conscience. I have to do something about this, I thought. I sent my little brother. He came there and got a rake put in his hands, but seriously, we don't really know rakes and stuff like that in my family. My brother didn't turn out a success really, and I got to hear that I was completely stupid again, but kinda fun.

Another time I had given her a Sony Vaio, a laptop. But then we had a fight, so I didn't think she should have that computer anymore. So I gave Keki, my kid brother, a new mission. Get it back, I said, and Keki usually does what I say, at least sometimes, so he went there, but what do you think happened? You can eat shit, Helena said. She wouldn't return anything, and soon afterwards we became friends again. But it was a mess. Those air bombs for example. We bought them from a guy who made them at home, and those were really powerful. At that time we had a friend who had a fast food place in Malmö, a good guy, But we agreed that we should blow some shit up at his place, just for fun, and for that we needed a car which couldn't be linked to us, and since Helena had a lot of contacts, I asked her: "Can you get me a SUV?"

Of course, she got me a Lexus, I guess she thought we would do something nice after all. But we went to his place and threw a bomb in the mailbox, and that box, it flew away. There was a loud bang and it went in seven million pieces, and the same night, since we were on the go, we called Keki. "Do you wanna have some fun?"

He probably didn't want to, but we went to his girlfriend's house, where they were sleeping, and threw two bombs in her garden. There was an insane bang there as well, and lots of smoke and shit, and parts of the lawn flew in the air, and of course, the girl came out: "What the fuck was that?" and Keki, he acted stupid: "Oh my god, what was that? That's so strange! Scary." But of course he knew, and really, you get this, it was kid's fooling around, stuff I always needed to do, sometimes still today actually, but of course, the time in Ajax was my most crazy period. It was before Mino Raiola and Fabio Capello got some sense in me.

I remember buying furniture for my brother at Ikea. He could pick anything he wanted. Already back then I had started helping my family quite a lot. I bought a house for mom in Svågertorp and eventually a car for my dad, despite him being so proud and not wanting to receive any gifts. But this time at Ikea I had a friend with me, and we had all the stuff in those shopping carts they have. One of the carts rolled away a bit past the checkout, and my friend of course got it immediately, he was smart, and I insisted: "Keep walking, go, go!"

So we got some of that stuff for free, and of course we liked that. But please don't think it was about money. It was the rush, the kick. It was the adrenaline. It was like the childhood in the department stores. But sure, definitely, sometimes it was too much. Like that thing with the Lexus. It was spotted in some shady place and it was reported everywhere and it became embarrassing for Helena, like: "Hey you, that car you rented was spotted at a bomb scene!" She got in a bad light because of me, sorry Helena, and then there was the Porsche Cayenne.

She had gotten it for us the same way. But we crashed it a bit in a ditch on the way home from Båstad, and she was furious about it, and you have to understand that, and on top of everything she had a break-in. Helena had worked hard, not only with marketing, but also extra at restaurants to be able to buy the house on the countryside, and quite a lot of nice stuff, furniture, a motorcycle and hi-fi equipment. She had worked hard to make that money, so it must have hurt when someone broke in and stole her Bang and Olufsen things and a lot of other stuff. I understand that.

But Helena thought I knew who had done it. She still does. But I have no clue. I promise. There's a lot of talking in my old hood. We find out about all shit that happens. One night I was parked outside my mom's place and some guy stole the wheels on my Mercedes SL. I found out at five in the morning and rumors had already spread and the police were there photographing and journalists, so I stayed indoors. But I started checking, and it didn't take long to find out who had stolen them, and after a week I had the wheels back. But I never found out who broke into Helena's place, and honestly, sometimes I can't

understand how she could put up with me. She had gotten involved with a maniac. But she put up with me, that was strong, and I think she got to see some results too.

Before, I had mostly been on my own and didn't really have anyone to talk to, not about the stuff in everyday life or things that bothered me. But now I had gotten some routines and something to miss and Helena came down more and more often, and we sort of became a little family, especially after she got that fat mops Hoffa who we fed pizza and mozzarella in Italy.

But before that many things would happen. It was now my career took off, and I got revenge once again.

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Helena



## CHAPTER 10

There had been a lot of Marco van Basten. I had inherited his shirt number and was supposed to be like him on the pitch and all that, and sure, it was flattering. But I was getting tired of it. I didn't want to be the new van Basten. I was Zlatan, nothing else. So no, I wanted to shout, don't bring that guy up again. I've heard enough of him. But still, of course, it was a really cool thing when he showed up in person, it was wow, is he talking to me?

van Basten is a legend, one of the best strikers ever, maybe not as good as Ronaldo, but still, he had scored over two hundred goals and totally dominated in Milan. It was almost ten years ago he had been chosen as the best in the world by FIFA, and now he had been on a coaching course and was going to be a assistant in Ajax junior team, a first step for him in that career. That's why he was close to us in trainings.

I became a little boy before him, at least in the beginning. But I got used to it. We talked almost on daily basis, and had some fun together. Before every game he triggered me. We talked and made bets and joked.

"Well, how many goals will you score this time? I think you'll score one."

"One? You're mad. I'll score at least two."

"Bullshit. You want to bet?"

"How much?"

We went on like that and he gave me a lot of advice, and he was really an awesome person. He did his own thing and didn't care about what the bosses thought of it. He was completely independent. I had gotten criticism because I didn't help out enough in defense, and even because I just stood there on the pitch when the opposition attacked, and I had thought about that of course, and wondered what I should do about it. I asked van Basten about it.

"Don't listen to the coaches!" he said.

"Why's that?"

"You shouldn't waste your energy on defending. You're supposed to use them in attack. You serve your team best by attacking and scoring goals, not by tiring yourself out in defense", and that became a thing I picked up: you have to save your energy for scoring goals.

We went to Portugal for a training camp and by that time Beenhakker had resigned as director and was replaced by Louis van Gaal. van Gaal was a pompous type. Kind of like Co Adriaanse. He wanted to be a dictator without any sense of humor. As a player he was nothing special, but in Holland he had a high status because he had won the Champions League with Ajax as coach and was knighted by the government for it. van Gaal liked to talk about playing systems. He was one of those in the club who talked about the players as numbers. It was a lot of the five goes here and the six there and I was happy when I didn't have to see him. But in Portugal I couldn't get away from him. I was going to meet up with van Gaal and Koeman and listen to what they thought of my first part of the season. It was one of those meetings whit grades that they loved in Ajax and I went to their room, sat in front och van Gaal and Ronald Koeman. Koeman smiled. van Gaal looked angry.

"Zlatan", Koeman said. "You've been fantastic, but you'll only get an eight. You haven't worked enough in defence."

"Alright, good", I said and wanted to go.

I liked Koeman, but couldn't put up with van Gaal, and I thought: Great, an eight is good enough. Can I go now?

"Do you know how to play in defense?"

van Gaal meddled, and I saw how Koeman got irritated as well.

"I hope so", I answered.

After that van Gaal started to explain and believe me, I had heard it before. It was the same old thing about how number nine, that's me, defend to the right when the ten goes to the left, and vice versa, and he wrote arrows and finished pretty strong:

"Have you understood? Do you get this?" and I saw it as an attack.

"You can wake every player from their sleep in the middle of the night", I said, "and ask them how they should defend and they will tell you, the nine runs this way and the ten runs that way. We know all that, and we know that you have made it up. But I have worked with van Basten, and he thinks the opposite."

"Excuse me?"

"van Basten told me that the number nine should save his energy for attacking and scoring goals, and honestly, now I don't know who I should listen to. van Basten who's a legend or van Gaal?" I said and I especially marked the words van Gaal, like he was some insignificant person, and what do you think? Did van Gaal become happy?

He was completely raging. Who should I listen to, a legend or a van Gaal?

"I have to go now", I said and got out of there.

There was talk again about Roma's interest, and Roma were coached by Fabio Capello, a real tough guy, it was said, who without any problems could bench or yell at any star player. It was indeed Capello who had coached van Basten in Milan during their prime and helped him become better than ever, and obviously I talked to van Basten about it: "What do you think? Wouldn't Roma be awesome? Will I make it?"

"Stay in Ajax", he said. "You have to develop as a striker before you come to Italy."

"Why?"

"It's much tougher there. Here you get maybe five, six chances to score a goal during a game, but in Italy you'll only get one or two and then you must be able to take advantage of that", and absolutely, in a way I agreed with him.

I hadn't hit it off just yet. I still scored a few goals, and I had a lot to learn. I needed to become more efficient in the penalty area. But still, Italy had been a dream from the beginning and I believed that my playing style would suit the league. That's why I went to my agent, Anders Carlsson:

"What's up? What do you have going for me?" Of course, Anders wanted the best for me. He checked it out and came back. But what did he have to show?

"Southampton is interested", he said.

"What the fuck! Southampton! Is that my level?"

Southampton!

During this time I had bought a Porsche Turbo. It was wonderful, but completely suicidal. It felt like a go-kart. I was like a maniac in it. Me and a friend had driven it in Småland, outside Växjö, and I had pushed the gas pedal. I came up to two hundred and fifty. It was nothing special back then. It was just that: when I put the brake on we heard police sirens.

The cops were after us, and I thought: Alright, bad situation, what to do? I can stop and say I'm sorry, here's my driving license. But honestly, those news bills? Did I want them? Would a debate about Zlatan as a maniac in the traffic help my career? Hardly, right? I looked back. The police were four cars behind us. They weren't getting anywhere since cars came from the other way, they were locked, and I had Dutch signs so they couldn't track me and I thought: They don't stand a chance, and I put in the second gear and accelerated. I pushed the gas as hell and came up to three hundred and those sirens were still loud, wee, wee, but weaker and weaker. The police car disappeared further and further away and eventually we couldn't see it anymore so we went under a tunnel and waited there like in a movie, and we made it.

It was a lot of that stuff with that car, and I remember that I was driving Anders Carlsson, the agent, in it. He was going to his hotel and then to the airport, and we got to a curve and it was a red light. But God, I couldn't, not in that car. I continued driving, like vroom, and he said:

"I think it was a red light."

"Is it true?" I answered. "I must have missed it", and then I drove away, right, left in the city. I was driving pretty wildly and he looked really sweaty, and when we arrived to the hotel he opened the door and got out without a word.

The next day he called me, really furious:

"That was the worst thing I've experienced."

"What?" I said.

I acted like I didn't know what he was talking about.

"That car ride."

Anders Carlsson wasn't a guy for me. That became more and more apparent. I needed another agent who weren't as careful with rules, and stop signs, and luckily Anders had then left IMG and was going to start his own firm so he had given me my new contract to sign. But since I hadn't done it yet I was a free man. It was just that: what should I do with my freedom? I had no clue, and at that time I didn't have many people to talk about football with.

I had of course Maxwell and some other players in the team, but still no; it was such a competition everywhere and I didn't know who I could trust, especially not when it came to agents and transfers. Everyone wanted to go on to big clubs, and it felt like I needed to talk to someone from outside. I thought of Thijs.

Thijs Slegers was a journalist. He had interviewed me for Voetbal International, and I had liked him right away. We had talked on the phone after the interview. He was someone I could exchange ideas with, and he knew stuff, I think. He knew how I was and what kind of guys I liked. I dialled his number again and explained the situation:

"I have to change agent. Who would be the best for me?" And Thijs, he's so awesome.

"Let me think about it" he said, and absolutely, I was going to let him think, I didn't want to do anything prematurely.

"Listen", he said later on. "There are two agents that I can think of. One is the company that works for Beckham. They're supposed to be great, and then there's another guy. But..."

"What?"

"He's Mafioso."

"Mafioso sounds good", I said.

"I suspected that you would say that."

"Wonderful. Make the meeting happen."

The guy wasn't really a Mafioso. He just had that style. His name was Mino Raiola, and I had heard of him before. He was Maxwell's agent and via Maxwell he had tried to get in touch with me a couple of months earlier. That's how he works. Mino always goes through middle hands. He always says: If you approach them yourself, you seem weak. But with me it hadn't gone too well – I had been cocky, and told Maxwell:

"If he has anything concrete he can show up, or else I'm not interested", but Mino had sent word back: "Tell this Zlatan to go and fuck himself", and even though I probably became angry then, it triggered me now when I got to know some stuff about him. I'm raised with that style; go fuck yourself and all that stuff. I feel at home with that type of talk, and I felt that Mino and I had the same background. None of us had gotten anything for free. Mino is born in southern Italy in the Salerno province. But as a kid his family moved to Holland and opened a pizza restaurant in the city of Harleem. Mino had to clean and do the dishes as a kid, and also as a waiter. But the kid advanced. He started taking care of the economy and that type of stuff.

He fought his way up as a teenager. He did all kinds of stuff; he studied law, made business and learned languages. And also, he liked football, and wanted to be an agent early in his life. Holland had a sick system before that determined that the players should be sold without any fee that was based on age and some statistical shit, and he went against that. He challenged the football federation once, and he really didn't start with nobodies. As early as 1993 he sold Bergkamp to Inter and in 2001 he had helped Nedved to get to Juventus for forty one million Euros.

But he wasn't a top dog, not yet, but it was said that he was rising and was able to use any tricks and that sounded good. I didn't want a good boy again. I wanted to be bought and get a good contract, and that's why I decided to impress that Mino. When Thijs arranged the meeting at Okura Hotel in Amsterdam, I put on my cool brown leather jacket from Gucci. I wasn't going to be that dork in the sweat pants again and get fooled once more. I put on my gold watch and took the Porsche, and parked it just outside.

Like, here am I, and then I went in to Okura, and that Hotel, seriously! It's just by the Amstel Channel and incredibly elegant and luxurious, and I thought: Now it's on, I have to stay cool, and I went on to the sushi restaurant in there. We had booked a table there, and I didn't really know what type of person to expect,

probably some type of suit with even a cooler gold watch. But what the hell showed up? A guy in jeans and Nike-T-shirt and with that belly, like, like the guys from the Sopranos.

Was this Santa supposed to be an agent? And when we ordered, what do you think? We got a little sushi with an avocado and shrimps? We got food for five people, and he ate like a mad man. But then he started talking, and he got right to the point. There was no elegant shit, and I felt right away, this is good, and I told myself: I want to work with this guy. We think the same, and I prepared to shake hands for the collaboration.

But do you know what he did, that smug bastard? He took up four papers he had printed from the Internet and on them there were a lot of names and numbers, like Christian Vieri, twenty seven games, twenty four goals. Filippo Inzaghi, twenty five games, twenty goals. David Trezeguet, twenty four games, twenty goals. And lastly, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, twenty five games, five goals.

"Do you think I can sell you with stats like this", he said, and I thought, what's this attack? But then I got back.

"If I had scored twenty goals even my mom could have sold me", I answered, and then he became quiet, he wanted to laugh, I know that today. But he was doing his thing. He didn't want to lose his upper hand.

"You're right. But..."

What the fuck is it now? I thought. It felt like he was going to attack me again.

"You think you're all that, huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You think you can impress me with your watch, your jacket and your Porsche. But you don't. Not at all. I think it's just silly."

"Alright!"

"Do you want to be the best in the world? Or the one who makes the most money and can glide around in stuff like this?"

"Best in the world!"

"Good! Because if you get to be the best in the world, the other things will come as well. But if you're only after money, there will be nothing, you get it?"

"I get it."

"Think about it, and let me know", he said and then we ended the meeting.

I got out of there and felt, alright, I'll think about it then. I can also be cool like that and let him wait. But no, I hadn't even got to the car before I started itching. I called him:

"Listen, I can't wait, I want to start working with you right now."

He got quiet.

"Alright", he said. "But if you're going to work with me, you'll do as I say."

"Yeah, sure."

"You're going to sell your cars. You're going to sell your watches and start training three times harder. Because your stats are crap."

Your stats are crap! I should have told him to go to hell. Sell my cars? What was his problem with them? We went too far, no doubt about that. But still, he was right, wasn't he? I gave him my Porsche Turbo. Not just to be a good boy, it was good to get rid of that car, honestly. I would only kill myself in it. But it didn't stop there.

I started driving around with the clubs fucking boring Fiat Stilo, and I put away my gold watch. I put on an ugly Nike watch instead and walked around in sweat pants again. It was going to be a rough time now, and I trained like a maniac. I really killed myself out there and I started to get it, all of it was true. I had been too satisfied, thinking I was some cool kid. But that was the wrong attitude.

In reality I had scored too few goals and been slow. I hadn't been motivated enough. I understood that more and more and started giving everything on the training pitch and the games. But it was true, it wasn't easy to change overnight. You start out hard, but then you get tired. Luckily I had no chance to rest. Mino was on me like glue.

"You like when people tell you that you're the best, right?"

"Yeah, maybe."

"But it's not true. You're not the best. You're shit. You're nothing. You have to work harder."



"You're the shit. You just moan. You should work out yourself."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Fuck you."

It got easily aggressive between us, or rather, it seemed aggressive. But we were raised like that, and obviously I got it, that whole attitude, you're nothing and that, was his way to get me to change attitude, and I really think he succeed. I started to say those things to myself:

"You're a nobody, Zlatan. You're a shit. You're not even as half as good as you think! You have to work harder."

I was triggered by it, and became even more of a winner. The coach wasn't going to send me home now. I gave everything in every situation and wanted to win every single game or competition even on practice, and indeed I had a pain in my left groin. But I didn't care about it. I just went on. I wasn't going to give up. Didn't even care if it got worse and worse. I took the pain. Several other players in the team were injured then. I didn't want to give the coach more problems, and I often played with pain killers. Just tried to ignore the shit. But Mino saw, he got it. He wanted me to work hard, but not to break.

"You can't do it anymore, kid", he said. "You can't play injured", and then I took it seriously and visited a specialist, and it was decided that I needed an operation.

In the university hospital of Rotterdam they fixed my left groin, and afterwards I had to build up its strength in the club swimming pool. It was no game. Mino told the fitness coach that I have had it easy.

"The kid had joked around. Now he has to fight his heart out totally! Just get on him!"

I had to have this damn pulse watch on me, and some kind of floating device that held me up, and then I started running in the water until I reached my absolute maximum, and afterwards I wanted to puke. I fell down at the poolside. I just have to rest, collapse. I couldn't move. I was totally ended, and once I had to pee, and it got worse and worse. But I didn't have the power to go to the bathroom. There was a hole at the poolside and I peed in that hole, what else could I do? I was totally done.

"In Ajax we had a discipline rule: we weren't allowed to go get food before they said "Go" (ed note: I can't translate the Swedish word "varsågod" and I couldn't find anything on the net. But they didn't say "Go", it was more like "Here you are" or "Please"), and often I got to the food before they even said the first syllable. I was always hungry as a wolf. Now I couldn't even raise my head. As much as they shouted I still laid there at the poolside.

I went on like this for two weeks, and the strange thing was that it wasn't only rough. There was also something great about that pain. I was enjoying to completely end myself, and I started to get what hard work really means. I entered a new phase and felt stronger than ever. When I came back from the rehab I gave everything on the pitch and started to dominate.

I got confident, and posters like "Zlatan, the son of God", and stuff like that started to show up. People were screaming my name. I got better than ever, and it was obviously wonderful, but also, as always: when someone's shining others get jealous and there was already some tensions in the team, especially between the young guys who all wanted to show themselves and get sold to big clubs.

I guess that for example Rafael van der Vaart wasn't completely happy about the development. Rafael was probably the most popular player in the country then. He was definitely the one that was most loved by Ajax fans who didn't really like the foreigners on the pitch, and Ronald Koeman made him team captain, despite Rafael being only twenty one years old. I was probably some cocky thing for him, and he was also head hunted by the gossip press. He had it going with some famous chick, and maybe it wasn't easy for him to get my success on the pitch in that situation. Rafael probably saw himself as the big star and didn't want any competition. I don't know, and then he wanted to get sold, like the rest of us. He did everything to get out of there, I think. On the other hand, it's true, I didn't know him, and didn't care either.

I was the summer of 2004, and the tension between us didn't explode until August. In May and June it was still pretty cool. We had won the league again, and Maxwell, my friend, was chosen as the best player in the league and I was happy for him. If there's someone I want the best for its him, and I

remember that we went to Haarlem to eat in the pizza restaurant where Mino had grown up, and there I talked to Mino's sister. She was wondering one thing, she said. It was about their dad.

"My dad has started driving around in a Porsche Turbo", she said. "That's kind of strange actually. It's not exactly the type of car he's had before. Does this have anything to do with you?"

"Your dad..."

I missed the Porsche, but it was probably in better hands now, and that summer I really wanted to stay away from stupid things and concentrate only on football. EC in Portugal was coming up. It was my first championship was I was established in the NT, and I remember Henke Larsson calling. Henke was a role model. He was at the end of his time in Celtic then. He was going to get sold to Barcelona after the summer, and after the loss against Senegal in the WC he had explained:

"I'm not playing in the NT anymore. I want to be with my family", and of course, you had to accept that, especially from a guy like him.

But he was missed. We were going to play in the same group as Italy and needed all the strong players we could get, and I guess that most people were losing hope of him coming back. But now he said that he had changed his mind and wanted to play, and it made me shine up. Now it would probably be me and him in attack. That would make us stronger, and I noticed how the pressure was mounting up and there were talks about my international breakthrough in this competition, and I understood that I would have many eyes on me, also from foreign scouts and coaches. Days before we went away the fans and journalists were on me like maniacs and in moments like that it felt good to have Henke. He had been through uproar on the highest level, but of course, the circus around me was sick back then and I don't forget when I asked him later on.

"Damn, Henke, what should I do? If anyone should know it's you. How should I deal with this?"

"Sorry, Zlatan. You're on your own from now on. A circus like this has no Swedish player ever been through!"

For example a Norwegian guy came with a damn orange. There had been a lot of talks about oranges since John Carew in Valencia had criticized my game and I had answered:

"What John Carew does with a football, I can do with an orange", and now the Norwegian journalist came and wanted me to show what I could do with that fruit.

Get out of here, why should I make this guy famous as well? Why should I go with his thing?

"You can take your orange, peel it and eat it. It's good vitamins for you", I said, and of course, that also became a thing, he's so cocky and arrogant, and there was more talks about how the relationship between me and media was tense.

But honestly, was that so strange?

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At home in Holland



Maxwell



## CHAPTER 11

No one knew about Helena and me, not even her mother. We had decided to keep it secret. The smallest thing about me resulted in headlines, and we didn't want the media start digging and writing about our relationship before we even knew what we were doing.

We did everything to screw them of the story, and in the beginning our differences probably helped. No one would believe I dated someone like her, an eleven year older woman who had her own career. If we were seen in the same place, like a hotel or something, people still didn't get it, and that was good. It helped us. But all the game playing and secrecy came at a price.

Helena lost some friends and felt lonely and isolated, and I was more mad at the media than ever. The year before I had flown to Gothenburg for a national team game against San Marino. Things had started to work well in Ajax, and I was in a good mood, talking freely like in the old days, also with a reporter from Aftonbladet. I certainly hadn't forgotten what the paper had done with the stuff that happened at Spy Bar. But I didn't want to hold any grudges, so I kept talking, even about getting a family in the future, nothing out of the ordinary, not at all. It was normal chatting - like, it would be nice to have kids at some point in the future. But do you know what the reporter did?

He made the article like a personal ad. "Do you want to win the Champions League with me? Athletic 21 year old guy, 192 cm/84 kg, dark hair and brown eyes looking for woman in the right age for serious relationship", he wrote, and what do you think? Did that make me happy? I was furious. What kind of respect was that? A personal ad! I wanted to knock the fucker out, so it was not a good thing that we met the day after in the dark corridor at the stadium.

I had heard that the paper knew I was pissed off. I think someone from the national team had told them, and now he wanted to apologize so we could continue with business as usual. Already back then my name meant a lot of money for them. But believe me, that was not on the agenda, and I guess I should be happy that I stayed reasonably calm. I managed to keep it down to hissing at him:

"What kind of fucking clown are you? And what the fuck are you trying to say? That I have problems getting girls, or what?"

"I'm so sorry, I just wanted to..." He was just rambling, didn't make any sense.

"I will never talk to you again", I yelled and walked away, but honestly, I thought that I had scared him, or at least made the paper act with some respect after that. But it got worse. We won the national game by 5-0 and I scored two goals and what do you think Aftonbladet's headlines were the next day? Hurrah Sweden? We're going to the Euros? Not really. They said "Shame on Zlatan!" and it wasn't like I had pulled my pants down or beaten down the referee.

I had taken a penalty - and scored. It was 4-0 and I had been fouled inside the box, and sure, ok, Lars Lagerbäck had his list with penalty shooters and Kim Källström was on top of it, but he had just scored, and I thought, hey this is my thing, I'm on a roll, and when Kim came up to me I moved the ball to my other side, like don't take my toy, and then he reached out with his hand: Give it to me!

I hi-fived him instead, put down the ball and took the shot, it wasn't more than that, but it wasn't the best thing I've done and I apologized afterwards, but come on, it wasn't like the Balkan war. It wasn't a riot in the suburbs. It was a goal in football. Still, Aftonbladet had six pages about it and I didn't understand anything. For fucks sake, printing personal ads, and shame on you Zlatan when we win by 5-0.

"If anyone should be ashamed it's Aftonbladet", I said at the press conference the next day.

After that I boycotted the paper, and when the Euros began in Portugal it wasn't exactly a time to make up. I continued my war, but I took a risk. If I didn't speak with them they would have nothing to lose. and the last thing I wanted was that my relationship with Helena would become public. It would be a disaster for the preparations, so I had to be careful. But what could I do? I missed her. "Can't you come over here?" I said. She couldn't. She was too busy. But apparently some of her bosses had bought tickets for the Euros and weren't able to go: "Does someone else want to go instead?", they said, so she thought: It's a sign, I'm going, and she was with me for a few days. But as always we kept a low profile, and not even anyone on the national team knew about her; the only one who seemed to have suspected there

was something about her was that guy Skara-Bert [ed note: famous Swedish music mogul] who had bumped into her at the airport and had wondered what someone like her was doing amongst all the football fans and their nt jerseys and funny hats. But we managed to keep it secret, and I was able to focus on football. We were a nice bunch in the squad. We were good guys, and then there was the primadonna. The primadonna did his silly shit, like: "In Arsenal, you see, we do it like this. This is the way to do it. Because in Arsenal they know about these things, and I play for that team." Stuff like that.

It pissed me off. "My back hurts so much", he said. Oh my. "I can't ride on the regular bus. I must have my own. I must have this and that." I mean, who the fuck was he doing his upper-class shit with us? Lars Lagerbäck talked to me about him:

"Zlatan, please, try to handle this professionally. We can't have any conflicts in the squad."

"Hey", I said. "If he respects me I respect him. End of story", and there was some arguing about that.

But a part from that, Jesus, the atmosphere was amazing. When we started the first game against Bulgaria in Lisbon it was like the entire stadium was dressed in yellow, and everyone sang, "Get the ball in the goal", Markoolio's Euro-song, and everything was so powerful and we completely crushed Bulgaria.

It ended 5-0 and the expectations on us grew. But it was still like the Euros hadn't begun. The big game that everyone was waiting for of course was against Italy in Porto on the 18th of June, and it was no secret that the Italians were gearing up for this and were full of revenge. They had only gotten a draw in the first round against Denmark, and of course none of them had forgotten the loss in the last Euros against France in Rotterdam. Italy were forced to win and had an amazing team with Nesta, Cannavaro and Zambrotta in the back and Buffon in the goal and Christian Vieri in attack, and although Totti, their big star, was suspended, he had spat at an opponent in the game against Denmark, meeting these guys was a big challenge.

It was my most important game so far, and my dad was there watching, and the atmosphere was amazing, and already in the beginning of the game I noticed that the Italians had respect for me. It was like, what a trick is this guy going to pull now, and I fought their defence. But it wasn't easy. The Italians had an incredible offense and at the end of the first half Cassano, a young guy who had replaced Totti, scored 1-0 after a pass from Panucci, and no one can say it wasn't fair, the italians had dominated. But we worked our way back into the game and we had some chances in the second half. But still, it was Italy's game, and equalizing against them isn't an easy thing. The italians are known to have the best defense in the world. But with only five minutes to go we got a corner to the left.

Kim Källström took it and there was some commotion in the box. Marcus Allbäck hit the ball, and Olof Mellberg too, and it was all chaos. But with the ball high up in the air I ran towards it, I jumped, and heeled it. A bit of kung fu. On the photos my heel is at the height of my shoulder, and the ball flew perfectly over Christian Vieri who tried to reach it, and there weren't many centimeters between his head and the crossbar. But it went in, in the top left corner, and it was against Italy.

It was the European Championship. It was a heel and only five minutes to go and I ran like crazy and the whole team was after me, as crazy as me, all exept one of course, who ran the other way. But who cared\_ I threw myself down and everyone was over me and Henke screamed: Enjoy! Just like that! Like he instantly understood the level of what was happening, and sure, we only got a draw. But it felt like we had won, and we advanced to the quarter finals and were facing Holland, also a tense game of course.

The dutch fans in their orange clothes and hats where booing and whistling at me like I was playing for the wrong team, and the game was extremely tight with a lot of chances. But still it was 0-0 at full time, and we went into extra time. We had shots hitting both the crossbar and the post. We should have scored a few times over. But we were forced to a penalty shoot-out, and the entire stadium was like praying to God.

There were nerves all over the place, and as always, many didn't even dare watching. Others were booing and tried psyching us. The pressure was incredible. But it started well. Kim Källström scored and Henke too. It was 2-2, and it was my turn. I had a black hairband. I had long hair, and I was smiling a little



bit, I don't know why. But I felt quite cool, despite everything, I was nervous, but still, I didn't panic or anything, not at all, and Edwin van der Sar was in their goal. It really should be fine.

Today when I shoot a penalty and know exactly where to put it, and that's in the net. But then I got this strange feeling, and that feeling came just as I approached the ball. It was like was only going to shoot it, and I did. I just shot, like it would be a surprise where the ball would go, and I missed completely. I shot it to hell. It was a disaster and we were kicked out of the tournament - Olof Mellberg missed too - and believe me; it's no fun memory. It was shit. We had a great team. We should have gone further in the Euros. But still; those games got things started.

August is a busy month. The transfer window closes on the thirty first and there are rumours about transfers buzzing everywhere. You call it Silly season. It's another pre-season and the papers don't have anything else to write about: Will he go there? Or here? How much will the clubs pay? It's boiling in the air and many players get stressed, and it was especially clear in Ajax.

All the young guys wanted to be sold, and everywhere people were looking nervously at each other: Does he have something going? Does he? And why isn't my agent calling? It was tense and there was a lot of jealousy and I was just walking around waiting, but I still tried to concentrate on football, and I remember, we were playing against Utrecht, and the last thing I thought was that I'd be substituted. But it happened. Koeman waved me in, and I was so pissed off that I kicked down an advertising billboard by the pitch, like what the fuck, putting me on the bench?

Already at that time I had the habit of calling Mino after the games. It was nice getting to talk with him and whine a bit in general, but this time I was screaming:

"What kind of asshole takes me off the pitch? How fucking stupid can someone be?" and even though Mino and me had a rough style between us I expected some support in that situation, like: Yes, I agree with you, Koeman must have had a stroke, poor you.

Mino said:

"Of course he took you off. You were the worst one on the pitch. You were shit."

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"You sucked. You should have been put on the bench earlier."

"Hey", I said.

"What?"

"Go fuck yourself. You and the coach."

I hung up and took a shower and went home to Diemen, and my mood wasn't exactly improving. But as I came home I saw someone standing at my door. It was Mino. How does he dare, that idiot, I thought, and I hadn't even stepped out of my car before we started screaming shit at each other again.

"How many times do I have to tell you this?" he yelled. "You were shit, and you're not supposed to kick down fucking billboards. You have to grow up."

"Go to hell."

"Go and fuck yourself!"

"Fuck you. I want to get out of here", I yelled.

"You have to move to Turin then."

"What are you talking about?"

"I may have Juventus going."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me", and I did. I just couldn't understand, not in the middle of that fight.

"You have a deal with Juventus for me?"

"Maybe."

"Are you fucking wonderful, you fucking idiot?"

"Nothing is set yet, but I'm working on it", he said and I thought, Juventus!

That was something different than Southampton.

Juventus might have been the best club in Europe at the time. They had stars like Thuram, Trézéguet, Del Piero, Buffon and Nedved, and sure, they had lost the Champions League final against Milan the year before. But on paper no other team was even close. All the players were superstars, and the club had just

signed Fabio Capello, the coach from Roma who had wanted me for several years, and I really started hoping. Come on Mino, I thought, make this happen!

Juventus was run by Luciano Moggi at that time. Moggi was a tough one, a man of power who had worked his way up from nothing and become one of the hotshots in Italian football. He was the king of the transfer market.

The guy had turned Juventus around. The club had won the league time after time under him. But Luciano Moggi wasn't exactly known to be Snowwhite. There had been some scandals around him with bribes, doping and trials and shit and rumours about him belonging to the Camorra from Naples. That was bullshit of course. But the guy really looked like a mafioso. He liked cigars and cocky suits and he had no limits as a negotiator. He was the master of deals, and definitely not a harmless counterpart. But Mino knew him.

You could say they were old enemies who had become friends. Mino had booked a meeting with Moggi and tried to get business going. But the start wasn't great. Moggi's office was like a fucking waiting room. There were like twenty people outside and all were impatient. But nothing happened. Time just passed and eventually Mino got mad. He just left, furious as hell: what the fuck, ignoring a meeting like that? Most people had probably accepted the situation. Moggi was a big shot. But Mino didn't respect stuff like that. If he was treated badly, then he was. So he looked up Moggi later the same day at the club's favourite restaurant Urbani in Turin.

"You've treated me badly", he hissed.

"Who the fuck are you?" said Moggi.

"You will see when you want to buy a player from me", Mino roared, and he continued being mad at the old man.

He even introduced himself like that to other football bosses: "I am Mino. I am against Moggi", and since Moggi was a guy with many enemies, that was often a good line. The problem was just that sooner or later Mino would have to do business with Moggi, and in 2001 Juventus wanted to buy Nedved, one of Mino's star players. But nothing was set, not at all, Mino had Real Madrid going as well, and him and Nedved were meeting with Moggi in Turin only to discuss things. But Moggi put things at stake, and called reporters, photographers and fans. He put a huge welcoming committee together already before the negotiations began, and Nedved and Mino couldn't get out of that trap.

Not that it really bothered Mino. He wanted Nedved in Juventus, and that trick had given him the chance to improve the contract, but for the first time he was impressed by Moggi. The old man might have been an asshole that time, but he knew his game, and the two of them made peace and became friends. "I am Mino. I am all for Moggi", kind of. They weren't exactly cuddling, but there was a respect there, and apparently some other clubs had dissed me. Moggi was the only one really interested. But it wouldn't be easy.

Moggi didn't have a lot of time for us. We could meet him in secret for half an hour in Monte Carlo. It was during the Formula-1 race, Monaco Grand Prix, and I guess Moggi was in town for business. The Fiat Group owns both Ferrari and Juventus and we were meeting him in a VIP-room at the airport. But the traffic was terrible, and we didn't get anywhere by car. We had to run, and Mino isn't exactly a physical phenomenon. He's over weight. He was panting. He was sweaty and hadn't exactly dressed up for the meeting.

He wore Hawaii-shorts, a Nike-sweater and sneakers and no socks and was drained in sweat, and we came bashing into that VIP-room at the airport and there was smoke everywhere. Luciano Moggi was puffing a fat cigar. He's a bit older and bald, and you feel it instantly, this guy is powerful. He's used to having people do what he tells them to. But now he was just staring at Mino's clothes.

"What the fuck are you wearing?"

"Are you here to check out what I look like or what?" Mino hissed back and that's where it all started.

Around this time we played a friendly with Sweden against Holland in Stockholm. Just a friendly, but none of us had forgotten the loss in the Euros and of course we wanted to show that we could beat Holland. The whole team was full of revenge, and it was an offensive, quite aggressive game, and



already early in the game I got the ball just outside the box. Immediately four dutch players were all over me. One of them was Rafael van der Vaart, and they were all pulling me. It was a tough situation, but I pushed my way through it and got the ball to Mattias Jonson who was all clear.

He scored 1-0, and afterwards van der Vaart was lying down and had pains. He was carried out on a stretcher with an injury to a ligament in his ankle, he wasn't too badly injured. But maybe he would miss a game or two, and in the newspapers he said that I had injured him deliberately. I jumped. What kind of shit was that? It wasn't even a foul, and he's talking about deliberately. And that guy was my captain!

I called him: "Listen, I'm sorry, I'm sad about your injury, and I apologize, I didn't do it on purpose, do you hear me?" And I said the same thing to the press. I said it a hundred times. But van der Vaart continued talking, and I just couldn't understand it. Why the fuck would he talk shit about his own teammate? It was insane. Or was it really?

I started thinking, because don't forget, it was August and the transfer window was open. Maybe he wanted to fight his way out of the club? Or fight ME out of the club for that matter? It wasn't the first time tricks like that were used, and the guy got media down there with him too.

He was the dutch guy. He was the darling of the gossip pages, and I was the bad boy and all that, the foreigner. "Are you serious?", I said when I met him at practice. And apparently he was.

"Okay, okay", I said. "Then let me tell you one last time. It was not on purpose. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you!"

Still he wouldn't back an inch, and the atmosphere in the club became more and more intense. The whole team was divided in two. The dutch were on Rafael's side, and the foreigners on mine. Eventually Koeman called for a meeting, and by that time the whole thing was driving me insane. What the fuck? Accuse me of shit like that? I was boiling inside and up there in the lunch room on the third floor we all sat down in a circle, and I could feel it in the air immediately. It was serious. The management had decided we had to reconcile. We were key players and we had to be friends. But there weren't exactly any openings. Rafael went on harder than ever.

"Zlatan did it on purpose", he said and my eyes turned black.

What the fuck, why couldn't he just give up?

"I didn't hurt you on purpose, and you know that, and if you accuse me of that one more time I will break both your legs. And this time it will be on purpose", I said, and of course, everyone on van der Vaart's side started: "You see, you see, he's aggressive. He's crazy", and Koeman tried to calm things down:

"We don't have to go that far, we will work this out."

But to tell the truth, it didn't feel likely, and then we were called up to Louis van Gaal, the director. He and I had some fights before, and it didn't feel like the best thing to go there together with van der Vaart. It wasn't exactly like I was surrounded by friends, and van Gaal started his power talk immediately:

"I am the director here", he said.

Like, thanks for the info!

"And I'm telling you", he continued. "Bury the hatchet. When Rafael is well again, you are playing together!"

"Definitely not", I said. "As long as he's on the field, I'm not playing."

"What are you saying?", van Gaal replied. "He is my captain, you will play with him! You do it for the club."

"Your captain?" I said. "What kind of bullshit is that? Rafael goes to the media and says I injured him on purpose. What kind of captain is that? One who attacks his own teammates? I'm not playing with him, not a chance. Never. You can say whatever you want."

And then I left. It was a risky gamble. But of course, I was empowered by knowing I had things going with Juventus. Nothing was signed, but I was really hoping, and

I talked with Mino: What's happening? What are they saying? It was back and forth all the time, and in the end of August we were playing NAC Breda in the league. The papers were still writing and going on about the conflict, and they were on van der Vaart's side more than ever. He was their favorite. I was the bad boy who had injured him.

"Prepare to be whistled and booed at", Mino said. "The spectators will hate you."

"Good", I replied.

"Good?"

"It triggers me, you know that. I will show them."

I was triggered. I was. But the situation wasn't a simple one, and I told Koeman about Juventus. I wanted to prepare him, and talks like that are always difficult. I liked Koeman. He and Beenhakker were the first ones in Ajax who had seen my potential, and I didn't doubt that he would understand me now. Who didn't want to go to Juventus? But Koeman would hardly let me go of free will, and I knew that he recently had talked to media and said some players thought they were bigger than the club, and it was obvious: he was talking about me. I had to pick my words carefully and I decided to use some words van Gaal had said:

"I really don't want a fight about this too", I told Koeman. "But Juventus want me, and I hope you can work it out. It's the kind of opportunity you get once in a lifetime", and absolutely, just like I thought, Koeman understood, he had been a professional player himself.

"But I don't want you to leave us", he said. "I want to keep you. And I will fight for it!"

"Do you know what van Gaal has said?"

"What?"

"He said he doesn't need me for the league. You can do it without me. But he needs me for the Champions League."

"What the fuck? Did he say that?"

Koeman freaked out. He became crazy at van Gaal. He thought those words tied his hands and made it more difficult to fight for me, and that was exactly what I wanted, and I remember stepping out on the stadium thinking it was all or nothing. It had become an important game for me. The people from Juventus would study me closely. But it was insane. It felt like the Dutch were spitting on me. They were whistling and screaming, and high up in the stands sat Rafael van der Vaart and he was applauded, it was ridiculous. I was viewed as crap. He was the innocent victim. But everything would change.

We were playing with Breda, and when twenty minutes remained it was 3-1 for us. As a replacement for Rafael van der Vaart we had a guy from the youth academy, Wesley Sneijder, and that guy was good. He played intelligently. He scored 4-1. He made it and broke through around this time, and only five minutes later I received the ball twenty meters from the box. I had a defender on my back and we were pushing and pulling each other, and I came loose, and I dribbled past another guy. That was the start. That was the intro. I continued with a fake shot, and got closer to the box, and did another trick, I was trying to find an opening for a shot. But new defenders kept coming at me. There were many around me and maybe I should have passed the ball, but I didn't see an opening for that either. Instead I pushed through in a fast dribbling slalom, fooled the goalie too and put the ball in open goal with my left foot. It was an instant classic.

It was called my Maradona-goal since it in some ways was similar to Maradona's goal against England in the quarter-final of the 1986 World Cup. It was a dribbling through the entire team, and the stadium exploded. Everyone went crazy. Even Koeman was jumping around like crazy, no matter how much I wanted to leave him. It was like all the hatred against me turned around, into love and triumph.

Everyone was cheering and screaming; everyone stood up and jumped, everyone except one person. The camera panned over the cheering stadium and reached van der Vaart. He was sitting there, all stiff. He didn't move his face, not a movement, despite his own team had scored. He just sat there like my show had been the worst thing that ever happened, and maybe it was. Because don't forget, everyone had booed at me before kick-off!

Now they were screaming one name, and it was mine. No one cared about van der Vaart anymore, and all night and the day after the TV-channels showed the goal, time after time. It was later voted the most beautiful goal of the year by the viewers of Euro sport. But I was still focused on something completely different. The clock was ticking. The transfer window wouldn't be open for many more days, and Moggi made some trouble. Or made some tricks, hard to tell as always. Moggi suddenly said that I and Trézéguet couldn't play together, and David Trézéguet was the big goal scorer in Juventus.

"What nonsense is that?" Mino said.

"Their plying styles don't match. It won't work", he replied, and that didn't sound good, not at all.

When Moggi had an idea about something, it wasn't easy to change his mind. But Mino saw a possibility. He understood that Capello, the coach, had a different opinion. Capello had wanted me for a long time, and sure, absolutely, Moggi was the director. But you don't mess around with Capello either. That guy can floor any star with just a stare. Capello is really tough, so Mino took them both out for dinner, and he opened hard:

"Is it correct that Trézéguet and Zlatan can't play together?"

"What kind of talk is that? What does that have to do with our dinner?" Capello replied.

"Moggi said that their playing styles don't work together, right Luciano?"

Moggi nodded.

"So my question for Fabio: is this correct?" Mino continued.

"I don't care if it's correct or not, and you should to. What happens on the field is my problem. Just make sure that Zlatan comes here and then I will take care of the rest", Capello said, and seriously, what could Moggi do?

He couldn't tell the coach how to handle the game on the field. He was forced to fold, and Mino enjoyed every second of it. He had gotten them exactly where he wanted to. But nothing was finalized, and the dutch football awards were held in Amsterdam

Mino and I were there to celebrate Maxwell who received the award for the league's best player, and we were both very happy for him. But there wasn't much of celebrating. Mino was all worked up. He walked back and forth and talked to the directors of Juventus and Ajax, and all the time there were new problems and question marks, both real ones and some created just to improve your situation in the negotiations. I looked as the deal was in a deadlock, and the transfer window would close in the evening on the next day.

I was at home in Diemen playing Xbox, "Evolution" I think, or "Call of Duty", awesome games both of them. Those almost made me forget about everything. But Mino kept calling me every other minute. He was frustrated. My bag was packed and Juventus had a private jet standing by for me at the airport. So definitely, the club wanted me. But they couldn't agree on the price. It was this and that, and the Ajax management didn't seem to think the deal was serious. The Italians didn't even have a lawyer in place in Amsterdam, and I tried pressuring Ajax myself:

"The way I see it I'm not playing for you anymore. I'm finished with you!" I told van Gaal and his guys.

But nothing helped. Nothing happened and time passed, and I was all inside my Xbox, and you should see me in situations like that. I'm totally focused. My fingers dance over the gamepad. It's like a fever. All my frustration went into that game. I played on while Mino was sweating to get the deal done. He was going crazy too. Why couldn't Moggi even send a lawyer over to Amsterdam? What kind of style was that?

Of course it could be just part of the game. It does not easy know. Nothing felt certain, and Mino decided to give back. He called his own lawyer: "Get on a flight to Amsterdam", he said, "and pretend to be representing Juventus", and of course, the lawyer flew there and did his theatre act, and it helped, the negotiations sped up. But the deal wasn't closed and in the end Mino lost it. He called again.

"Fuck it", he said. "Bring the lawyer and fly over here. We have to close the deal from here", and I dropped the video game and left; I barely locked my door to tell you the truth.

I just left, and drove to our stadium where the club management was sitting with Mino's lawyer, and there were no doubts about it: everyone became stressed when I stepped into the room, and the lawyer was running around saying one single thing:

"We're just lacking a paper, one single paper. And then we're done."

"We don't have the time. We have to leave, Mino says 'fuck it'", I replied and we drove to the airport and Juventus' private jet.

I had already called my dad: "Hey, hey, it's urgent; I'm closing a deal with Juventus. Do you wanna come?"

Of course he wanted to, and that made me happy. If this worked out it was the dream of my life coming true, and then it would be nice to have dad by my side, we had lived through so much together. I know

that he left immediately to the Kastrup airport in Copenhagen and flew down to Milan where Mino's guy picked him up and drove him to the football federation office. All transfers are registered at that office.

He arrived there before me, and when I turned up with the lawyer i was surprised: Is that you, kind of? It wasn't the dad I was used to, definitely not the one who had been sitting at home listening to his jugge-music with his headphones and work pants. This was a guy in a cool suit, a guy who could pass for any Italian hot shot, and I felt proud, and to tell you the truth totally shocked. I had never seen him in a suit before.

"Dad."

"Zlatan."

It was beautiful, and there were reporters and photographers everywhere. The rumor had spread. It was big news in Italy. But nothing was set. The clock was ticking. There wasn't much time left playing with, and Moggi continued making problems, doing his tricks, and worse, it paid off. My price had gone down, from 35 million euros that Mino had asked first to 25, 20 and finally 16 million euros, one hundred and sixty million Swedish kronor, and sure, that was still a lot. It was twice what Ajax had paid for me. But it shouldn't have been a big deal for Juventus. They had sold Zidane to Real Madrid for 70 million. Clear as fuck they could afford it. The Ajax guys shouldn't worry. But they were nervous anyway, at least they said so. Juventus couldn't even produce a guarantee from the bank for the amount. Sure, there could have been a good reason for that.

Despite all the success Juventus had made a loss of twenty million euros the year before, but that was common amongst the big clubs, definitely. No matter how much income they had the costs always seemed to be bigger. No the thing with a bank guarantee, I wonder if that wasn't a trick, another thing for the negotiations? Juventus was one of the biggest clubs in the world, and surely should have been able to get that money on the table. But without a guarantee from the bank Ajax refused to sign anything, and time passed. It felt hopeless, and sure, Moggi was sitting there in his chair puffing his fat cigar, looking like he had things under control: like "this will work out", or "I know what I'm doing." But Mino was standing next to him with his headset screaming at the Ajax management:

"If you don't sign you won't get the sixteen million. You won't get Zlatan. You won't get anything. Do you get that? Not a fucking shit! And what are you thinking, that Juventus would run from the bill? Juventus! Are you fucking insane? But sure, go ahead, lose it all. You're welcome."

Those were tough words. Mino knows his stuff. But still nothing happened, nada, everyone became more nervous and I guess Mino needed an outlet for all his energy. Or he was just playing tricks. There were a lot of football things in that room, and Mino picked up a ball, and started playing with it. It was crazy. What was he doing? I didn't get it. And that ball flew around, bounced and hit Moggi in the head, and on the shoulder, and everyone was wondering: What's going on? Is he playing ball in this situation? In the middle of the most serious negotiations. It wasn't exactly time for games.

"Stop doing that! You're hitting people in the head."

"No, no, come on!" he went on. "We'll play ball about it, try and take it from me, get up Luciano, show your things. Here's a corner coming, Zlatan. Get on it. Head it you lazy fuck."

And he went on and on, and honestly I have no idea what the officials and other people in there thought. But one thing is certain; Mino gained a new supporter that day - my dad. Dad just laughed. What kind of person is this? How cool can you be? Playing ball, making tricks in front of a hot shot like Moggi. That was my dad's way. It was like making a song and dance in the wrong situation. It was like doing your thing no matter what, and since that day, my dad doesn't just collect press clippings about me. He collects everything that's written about Mino too. Mino is the favorite maniac, because of course, he noticed that: Mino wasn't just a simple maniac. He closed the deal too. Ajax didn't want to lose both me and the money, so they signed in the very last minute. It was after ten then, at least I think so, and the federation office was supposed to close at seven. But we made it happen, we closed the deal, and it took a while for me to get it. Playing in Italy? It was insane.

After that we drove to Turin, and on the highway Mino called Juventus hotspot Urbani and asked them to stay open, and their staff wasn't hard to convince. We were greeted like kings right around midnight, and sat down and had dinner and went through the whole deal, and I have to say, having dad there watching the whole thing made me so happy.

"I'm proud of you Zlatan", he said.

I and Fabio Cannavaro were signed at the same time and Juventus held a press conference for us at the delle Alpi Stadium in Turin. Cannavaro is a guy who's making jokes and is laughing all the time. I liked him from the first minute. He was chosen the best player in the world some year later, and he helped me a lot in the beginning. But immediately after the press conference me and dad flew straight to Amsterdam where we left Mino off before we continued to Gothenburg. I would play another national team game there.

It was a crazy period, and I never returned to my house in Diemen. I just left it behind me, and for a long time I stayed at the Hotel Le Meridien by Via Nizza in Turin. I lived there until I moved into Filippo Inzaghi's apartment at Piazza Castello.

So Mino had to go to Diemen and collect and forward all my old stuff. But when he came into the house he heard a noise from upstairs, and flinched. Was there a burglary going on? He heard voices and sneaked upstairs, carefully, ready for trouble.

But there were no thieves. My Xbox had been on making noise for three weeks, ever since I left for Milan with the Juventus jet.

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## CHAPTER 12

"Ibra, get in here!

Fabio Capello, maybe the most successful coach in Europe the last ten years, was calling for me, and I thought: What have I done now? All the anxiety from my childhood came back, and Capello could make anyone nervous. Wayne Rooney has said that when Capello walks past you in the hall, it kind of feels like you're dead, and it's true. He used to just take his coffee and pass you without a look, and it was almost scary. Sometimes he muttered "ciao". Other times he just disappeared, and it felt like you hadn't even been there.

I said that the stars in Italy don't jump just because the coach says so. That doesn't apply to Capello. Every player stands in line when he shows up. You behave before Capello, and I know a journalist who asked about this:

"How do you get such a respect from everyone?"

"You don't get respect. You take it", Capello answers, and that's something I've remembered.

When Capello got angry you hardly dared to watch him in the eyes, and if he gives you a chance and you don't take it, you basically have to start selling hot dogs outside the stadium for a living. You don't go to Capello with your problems; he's not your friend. He doesn't talk to the players, not like that. He is *sergente di ferro*, the sergeant of steel, and it's not a good sign when he's calling for you. On the other hand you never know. He breaks you down and builds you up. I remember a training session when we just had started doing some position play. Then Capello whistled his whistle, and shouted:

"Get in. Get out of the pitch", and no one understood.

"You've been slow. You've been shit."

We didn't get to train more that day, and it felt confusing, but of course, he had a thought. He wanted us to come pumped as warriors the next day, and I liked that style, because like I said, I'm not raised with cutie. I like guys with power and attitude and Capello believed in me.

"You don't have anything to prove, and know who you are and what you can do", he said in one of the first days, and that gave me security. I could loosen up a little bit. There had been a big amount pressure. Several papers had questioned the buy and written that I had scored too few goals. Many thought that I was going to be benched. How can Zlatan take place in a squad like this?

"Is Zlatan ready for Italy?" they wrote.

"Is Italy ready for Zlatan?" Mino countered, and that was correctly said.

You should answer with quotes like that. You had to play tough back, and sometimes I wonder: would I have made it without Mino? I don't think so. If I had arrived to Juventus like I arrive to Ajax, the press would have eaten me. In Italy they're crazy about football, and if we in Sweden write about the games the day before and after, they go on for the whole week in Italy. It just goes on, and you're graded all the time. You're inspected up and down, and before you get used to it it's rough.

But I had Mino. He was like a wall of defense, and I called him all the time. I mean: Ajax, what was that? A small school in comparison! If I was going to score in training I didn't have only Cannavaro and Thuram to get through, Buffon was in the goal as well, and no one treated me kindly just because I was new, it was the other way around.

Capello had an assistant named Italo Galbiati. Galbiati was an older man, I called him Old man. He was cool. He and Capello are a little bit of bad cop, good cop. Capello tells you the hard, tough things whilst Galbiati takes care of the rest, and already after the first training session Capello sent me to him:

"Italo, give the kid a hard time!"

The rest of the team had hit the showers, and I was all done. I would have loved to follow the rest of the team. But from the side a goal keeper from the junior's came, and I started to get it. Italo was going to feed me balls, bam, bam. They came against me from all different angles. There were crosses, passes, he threw the ball, he made one two's, and I shot against the goal, and was never supposed to leave the box, the penalty area. It was my area, he said. That was the place I was supposed to be and make shots, shoot, and there wasn't any talks of resting or taking it easy. It was a high tempo.

"Get them, harder, more determined, don't hesitate", Italo shouted, and that became a routine, a habit.

Sometimes Del Piero and Trezeguet came down also, but usually it was only me. It was me and Italo, and it was fifty, sixty, a hundred shots towards the goal. Sometimes Capello showed up, and he's like he is.

"I'm going to beat Ajax out of your body", he said.

"Alright, sure."

"I don't need that Dutch style. One, two, one, two, one two's, make a trick and play technically. Dribble through the whole team. I can make it without all that. I need goals. You get that! I have to get the Italian way in you. You have to get more killer instinct."

It was a process that had already started in me. I had my talks with van Basten, and with Mino. But I still didn't see me as a real goal getter, despite my place being up top. I was more the guy who should know everything, and there was still a lot of mom's block and tricks in my head. But under Capello I changed. His toughness infected me and I became less of an artist and more of a slugger who wanted to win at all costs.

Not that I didn't want to win before. I was born a winner. But still, don't forget, football had been my way to show myself! The tricks had helped me become someone else than another kid from Rosengård. It was all the "Oh, oh", "Wow, look at that!" that had gotten me started. It was the applause for the tricks that had made me grow, and for a long time I would have seen you as a stupid person if you'd said that an ugly goal was as important as a beautiful one.

But now I started to get it more and more, no one will thank you for your art and back heels if your team loses. No one even cares if you've scored a dream goal if your team don't win, and slowly I became tougher and more of a warrior on the pitch. Of course I didn't stop with that listen, don't listen. Didn't matter how strong and hard Capello was, I stocked to my own stuff. I remember the classes in Italian. It wasn't always easy with the language. On the field it was never a problem. Football has its own language. But outside I felt lost at times, and the club sent an Italian teacher to me. I was supposed to meet her two times a week and learn grammar. Grammar? Was I back in school, or what? I couldn't do it. I told her:

"Keep the money and don't tell anyone, no your boss, no one. But stay at home. Act like you've been here, and please don't take it personally", and sure enough, he did like I said. She went and acted. But don't think that I didn't care about learning Italian.

I really wanted to learn, and I got it in other ways, in the dressing room and at the hotels, and I could connect the dots easily. I learned fast and I was stupid and cocky enough to dare to talk even if the grammar came out wrong. Even before journalists I started with Italian before I started with English and I think that was appreciated. Here's a guy, like, who maybe can't, but he tries, and I did that with almost everything, I listened. I didn't listen.

But still, in a short time I changed both in the head and body. I remember the first game in Juventus. It was the twelfth September and we were facing Brescia, and I started on the bench. Up in the honorary section the owner family Agnelli sat and of course, they were checking especially me out: Like, is he worth the money? After the break I came in for Nedved, Nedved who was also Mino's guy and had been chosen as the best player in Europe the year before and possibly was the biggest training addict I've ever met. Nedved was on the bike for an hour before practice on his own. And afterwards he ran as long. He was not an easy player to replace, and it's true, it's no catastrophe if the first game is bad. But it's not going to help you either, and I remember that I ran on the left side and got two defenders against me. The situation seemed locked. But I rushed, and broke through and scored and heard the supporters scream from the stands: "Ibrahimovic, Ibrahimovic!" It was powerful, and it wasn't going to be the last time.

I was started to get called Ibra then – and it was Moggi who came up with it – or even the Flamingo for a time. I was still kind of skinny. I was hundred ninety six centimetres long but weighed only eighty four kilo, and Capello saw it as too little.

"Have you ever worked out in the gym?" he asked.

"Never", I said.

I had never even held a barbell, and he treated it as a minor scandal. He told the fitness coach to press me hard in the gym, and for the first time I started to care about what I put in me, alright, maybe it was still too much pasta, that would punish me later. But everything was more accurate in Juventus and I gained weight and became a heavier and stronger player. I Ajax they let the guys do kind of what they wanted.



That's really strange with all the talent in mind! In Italy we ate both before and after the practice and before the games we lived in hotels and had three meals together every day.

I got up to ninety eight kilo at most, but that felt as too much. I became clumsy, and had to do a little less workout and more running. But on the whole I changed to a tougher, faster and better player, and I learned to be completely respecting less towards the big stars. It doesn't pay off to step aside. Capello made me understand that. You have to take your place. The stars shouldn't hamper you, it's the opposite. They should trigger you, and I started to grow. I got respect, or rather, I took it. Step by step I became who I am today, the one that steps out from a lost game angry as a mad man and no one dares to come close, and absolutely, it can seem negative. I scare a lot of young players. I scream. I rage.

But I bring that attitude with me since Juventus, and just like Capello I decided to not care about whom people were. Their name could be Zambrotta or Nedved, if they didn't give it all in practice, they would hear about it. Capello didn't just beat Ajax out of me. He made me the guy that comes to a club and demands that the league title should be won, no matter that, and that has helped me a lot, no doubt about it. It changed me as a football player.

But it didn't make me calmer. We had a defender in the team, a French guy named Jonathan Zebina. He had played in Roma with Capello and won the scudetto with the club in 2001. He was with us now. I don't think he felt so good. He had personal problems and on training he played aggressively. One day in training he brutally tackled me. I stepped up to him and stood real close:

"If you want to play dirty, tell me, so that I can play dirty back!"

Then he head butted me, just bam, and after that it went fast. I didn't have the time to talk. It was a pure reflex. I hit him and it happened right away. He wasn't even done with the head butting. But I must have punched hard. He went down in the grass, and I had no idea what I was expecting. A crazy Capello who maybe ran and yelled. But Capello just stood there a bit away from us just ice cold like it didn't even have anything to do with him. Everyone else was talking: What happened? What is this? There was buzzing everywhere, and I remember Cannavaro, Cannavaro and I always helped each other.

"Ibra", he said. "What have you done?" For a moment I thought he was upset.

But then he blinked, like, Zebina deserved that. Cannavaro didn't like the guy either, not like he had behaved lately, but Lillian Thuram, the French guy, did it in another style.

"Ibra", he said. "You're young and stupid. You can't do that. You're just dumb." But he didn't have the time to say more. A roar echoed over the whole pitch and there was only one person who could scream like that.

"Thuuuuuraaaam", Capello screamed. "Shut up and get away from there", and obviously, Thuram got away, he became like a little child, and I got also out of there, I needed to cool down.

Two hours later I saw a guy in the massage room who had an ice bag pushed to his face. It was Zebina. I must have punched him really hard. He was still in pain. He was going to have a black eye for a long time, and Moggi fined the both of us. But Capello never did anything. He didn't even call for a meeting. He just said one thing:

"It was good for the team!"

That was all. He was like that. He was hard. He wanted adrenalin. You were allowed to fight, and the pumped like a bull. But there was one thing you definitely weren't allowed to do: challenge his authority or behaving with arrogance (ed note: problem with translating again. But we're not talking about the type of arrogance Ibra is 'famous' for. But the type of arrogance where you think you can win without giving your best). Then he flipped out. I remember when we were playing a quarter final against Liverpool in the Champions League. We lost by two-zero, and before the game Capello had made the tactics and decided who was going to cover who when Liverpool had a corner. But Lillian Thuram decided to change player. He covered another Liverpool player and on that occasion they scored. In the dressing room afterwards Capello made his ordinary walk up and down while we were all sitting there on the bench in a ring around him and wondered what was going to happen.

"Who told you to change player?" he said to Thuram.

"No one, but I figured it would be better that way", Thuram answered.

Capello took a couple of breaths.

"Who told you to change player?" he repeated.

"I thought it would be better that way."

It was the same explanation again, and Capello asked the question for a third time and got the same answer again. Then the outbreak came, the one that had been waiting in him like a bomb.

"Have I told you too change player or what? Is it me or someone else who's in charge? It's me, you hear that! I'm the one who tells you what to do. Do you understand that?"

Then he kicked the massage bench towards us with a big fucking power, and in times like that no one dared to look up. Everyone is just sitting there around him and stare to the ground, everyone, Trezeguet, Cannavaro, Buffon, every single one. No one moved, and no one would ever think of doing what Thuram did again. No one wanted to meet those raging eyes again. There was a lot of that. It was tough. There weren't small expectations. But I continued playing good.

Capello had substituted Del Piero to give me a place, and no one had benched Del Piero in ten years' time. To bench Del Piero was like putting the symbol of the club on the bench, and that made the fans crazy. They booed Capello and yelled at Del Piero – "Il pinturicchio, il fenomeno vero."

Alessandro Del Piero had won the league seven times with Juventus and had been a key player every year. He had won the Champions League with the club and he was loved by the owners. He was the big star. No, no normal coach bench Del Piero. But Capello wasn't normal. He didn't care about history or status. He just picked his team, and I was grateful for that. But it also put pressure on me. I must play especially good when Del Piero was on the bench, and indeed, I heard less and less of his name from the stands. I heard "Ibra, Ibra", and in December the fans chose me as the player of the month, and that was big.

I was really breaking through in Italy, but still and I knew that of course, you need so little in football. One moment you're a hero, in the next you're shit. The special training with Galbiati had given results, no doubt about that. By being fed with balls in front of the goal I had become more efficient and tougher in the box. I had a whole new set of situations in my blood, and I didn't need to think as much, it just happened, bam, bam.

Still and you don't forget that: being dangerous in front of goal is a feeling, an instinct. You either have it or you don't. You can conquer it, sure, but then lose it again when the feeling and the confidence disappears, and I had never seen myself as a goal scorer. I was the player who wanted to make a difference on the pitch. I was the one who wanted to know how to do everything, and sometime in January the flow disappeared.

I didn't score in five rounds. In three months I only scored once, I don't know why. It just became like that, and Capello started to attack me. As much as he had built me up before, he was putting me down now. "You haven't done a shit. You've been worthless", he said, but at the same time, he let me play.

He still had Del Piero on the bench and I guessed that he yelled because he wanted to motivate me, I was hoping that was the case at least. Capello wanted his player to believe in themselves, but they weren't allowed to get too cocky. He hated that and that's why he did stuff like that. He builds you up, and breaks you down, and I had no idea what was going on now.

"Ibra, get in here!"

The anxiety of being called to a meeting never ends for me, and I started wondering: Have I stolen a bike again? Or head butted the wrong guy? On my way to the dressing room where he stood and waited I tried to think of smart excuses. But it's hard when you don't know what it's all about. I just had to hope for the best, and when I came in Capello had only a towel around him. He had taken a shower. The glasses were foggy, and the dressing room was as worn out as usual. Luciano Moggi loved nice things. But the dressing rooms should be worn out. It was a part of his philosophy. "It's more important to win than having it nice", he used to say, and alright, sure, one can agree with that. But if we were four people in the shower at once the water rose on the floor up to the calves, and everyone knew that complaining wouldn't do any good. Moggi would just see it as a confirmation to his theory:

"You see, you see, it doesn't need to be fantastic for you to win", and that's why it was like it was and Capello came against me half naked in that worn out room, and I wondered once again: What is it? What have I done to you? There's something with Capello, especially when you're alone with him that makes you feel small. He grows. You shrink.

"Sit down", he said, and alright, sure, of course, I sat down. In front of me there was an old television with an even older VHS-player and Capello put a video cassette in it.

"You remind me of a player I coached in Milan", he said.

"I think I know who you're talking about."

"You do?"

"I've heard it many times."

"Perfect, and don't get stressed by the comparison. You're not a new van Basten. You have your own style, and I see you as a better player. But Marco van Basten had better movement in the box. Here's a movie where I've collected all his goals. Study his movements. Suck them in. Learn from them."

Then Capello got out of there, and I was alone in the dressing room and started to look, and really, it was really van Basten goals, from every corner and angle. The ball was just bombed in and Marco van Basten was there again and again, and I sat there ten minutes, fifteen and wondered when I could go.

Did Capello have anyone who was watching outside the door? It wasn't impossible. I decide to look through the whole cassette. It was twenty five, thirty minutes long, and then, alright, I thought. Nu it's enough. I got out of there. I snuck out, and honestly, I don't have a clue if I had learned anything. But I got the message; it was the same old thing. Capello wanted to make me score goals. I was supposed to get it in my head, in the movements, in my whole system and I knew that it was serious.

We were at the top of the league, alongside Milan, we changed between the number one and two spot and for us to win I needed to continue scoring goals. That was the truth, nothing else, and I remember that I really worked hard up there in the box. Bu I was well marked as well.

The opponent defenders were on me like wolves, and it started to get known that I have a temper. The players and the crowd tried to provoke me all the time with dirty tackles and taunts and shit. Gipsy, stuff about my mom and my family, they shouted everything, and sometimes it got to me. There were some head butts, or something of the kind where I tried to get even. But I play my best game when I'm angry, and everything just let go. The seventeenth April I scored a hat trick against Lecce, and the fans got wild and the journalists wrote:

"They said that he score to few goals. He's already done fifteen now."

I went to the third spot amongst the top scorers in the league. They talked of me as the most important player for Juventus. There were accolades everywhere; it was "Ibra, Ibra". But something else was in the air as well.

Catastrophes were luring around the corner.

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## CHAPTER 13

I had no idea about the cops and the district attorneys listening in on Moggi's phone, and I guess that was a good thing. We and Milan were fighting at the top of the table, and I was living with a girl for the first time. Helena had been working too hard. She'd been working at Fly Me in Gothenburg during the days and in restaurants during nights and at the same time she had been studying and travelling back and forth to Malmö.

She'd been working too much and wasn't feeling well, so I told her: "Enough of that. Move down here. Come to me", and although it was a huge adjustment I think she felt it was a good thing. It was like she could start breathing again.

I had moved out of Inzaghi's apartment to an amazing flat in the same building by Piazza Castello with high ceilings. It looked a bit like a church and on the ground floor there was the coffee shop Mood where the staff became our friends. They served us breakfast sometimes and even though we didn't have any kids back then we had Hoffa, the mops, the fat bastard, he was cool. We could get three pizzas for dinner, one for me, one for Helena and one for Hoffa, and he would eat the complete thing, inside out, except the crust; he'd just drool on it and throw it around the flat, thanks for that. He was our fat little baby, and we were great, it was fantastic. But of course, we came from different worlds.

We went to Dubai in business class on one of our vacation trips, and obviously me and Helena knew how to handle ourselves, on the flight you behave and all that. But my family is different, and at six in the morning my kid brother wanted a whiskey, and mom was in the seat in front of him, and mom, she's great, but you don't play games with her. She doesn't like it when we drink alcohol, and considering what we've been through you understand that. So she took off her shoe. That was her way of dealing with the problem. She hit and pounded Keki straight in the head with it. Bang, tjoff, ouch, and Keki went mad. He fought back. There was complete chaos in business class at six in the morning and I looked at Helena. She wanted to disappear.

I used to go to practice around a quarter to ten in Turin, but one day I was running late, I was running around our apartment I think we smelled smoke. Helena says so anyway, I don't know. But I'm sure that when I was leaving and opened the door there was a fire in the hallway. Someone had gathered roses and lit them on fire. Everyone in the building had gas stoves, and in the hallway just outside our door there was a balcony with a gas tube on the wall. It could have ended in disaster. There could have been an explosion. But we got buckets with water and put the fire out, and I just regretted not having opened the door thirty seconds earlier. Then I would have caught that idiot in the act and massacred him. Lighting a fire in our house? Sick! And with roses. Roses!

The police never figured out who did it, and at that time the clubs weren't as careful about security as they are now and we forgot about the incident. You can't walk around worrying all the time. There were other things to think about. There were new things all the time, and a lot had happened. Early in Turin I was visited by two jerks from Aftonbladet.

This was when I was living at the hotel Le Meridien. Aftonbladet wanted to repair our relationship, they said. I meant money to them, and Mino thought it was time to bury the hatchet. But remember, I don't forget. Things stick with me. I remember and I'll respond even if it's ten years later.

When the guys from Aftonbladet arrived I was up in my room and I think they had been talking with Mino for a while when I came down, and I immediately felt: this isn't going to work out. A personal ad! A made up police report!! "Shame on you Zlatan!" all over the country! I didn't even say hello. I became even more pissed off. What kind of fucking style had they been running? So I started bossing around, and I seriously think I scared them shitless. I even threw a water bottle at their heads.

"If you had come from my areas, you wouldn't have survived", I said, and maybe that was a bit harsh. But I was tired of it and pissed off and it's probably impossible explaining to you what kind of pressure there was. It wasn't just the media. It was the fans, the crowds, the coaches, the club management, the teammates, money. I had to perform and if I didn't score I would hear about it everywhere, at all levels, so I had to have some outlets. I had Mino, Helena, the guys in the team, but there were other things as well, simpler things, like my cars. They gave me a sense of freedom. I got my Ferrari Enzo around this time. The car was part of the negotiation's about my conditions. It had been me, Mino and Moggi and Antonio Giraudo, the president, and Roberto Bettega, the club's international guy, and we were sitting in a room discussing my deal when Mino said:  
"Zlatan wants a Ferrari Enzo!"

Everyone just looked at each other. We didn't expect anything else. Enzo was Ferrari's new top car; the coolest car they had ever produced, and it were only made in 390 copies, and we thought that we might be asking for too much. But Moggi and Giraudo seemed to think it was fair. Ferrari is part of the same company group as Juventus. Of course the guy should have an Enzo, kind of.

"No problem. We'll get you one", they said, and I thought: Wow, what a club!  
But of course, they hadn't really understood it. So when we had signed, Antonio Giraudo said: "And this car, it's the old Ferrari, right?"  
I flinched, and looked at Mino.  
"No" he said. It's the new one. The one that's only manufactured in 390 copies", and Giraudo replied.  
"I think we have a problem", he said, and we did.

There were only three cars left, and there was a long waiting list for those with some hot shots on it. What could we do? We called the boss of Ferrari, Luca di Montezemolo, and explained the situation. It was difficult he said, almost impossible. But he gave in eventually. I would get one if I promised never to sell it. "I will keep it until the day I die", I said, and honestly, I love that car.

Helena doesn't like riding it. It's too wild and jerky for her taste. But I'm crazy about it, and not just because of the usual things: it's cool, awesome, and fast: Here is the guy who made it. The Enzo gives me the feeling that I have to work harder to deserve it. It stops me from being content, and I can look at it and think: If I don't keep working it'll be taken away from me. The car is another driving force, a trigger for me.

At other times when I needed to trigger off I had a tattoo made. Tattoos became like a drug for me. I wanted something new all the time. But they were not any spurs of the moment. Everything was thought through. Still I had been against them at first. Thought it was poor taste or something. But I was tempted. Alexander Östlund helped me getting into it, and the first tattoo was my name, from hip to hip in white. It's only visible when I'm tanned. It was mostly just a test.

Then I became more daring. I heard the expression "Only God can judge me". They could write anything in their papers. Scream anything at the stadium. They still couldn't get to me. Only God can judge me! I liked it. You have to walk your own road, and I had those words tattooed. I had a dragon made as well, because in Japanese culture the dragon is the warrior and I was a warrior.

I had a carp done as well, the fish that goes against the current, and a Buddha-symbol that protects against suffering, and the five elements, water, earth, fire and all that. I had my family tattooed; the men on my right hand, right standing for power, dad, and my brothers and later the sons and the women on the left, left is where the heart is, mom, Sanela, not the half-sisters who had broken off with the family. It felt obvious back then, but later I would think about it, who is family and who isn't? But that was later.

I was focusing on football. The league win is often a done deal early in spring. Some team has left the others behind. But this year it was a fight up until the end. Both we and Milan had seventy points, and of course the papers were writing a lot. It was all set for a drama. On the 8th of May we were facing each other at San Siro. It felt like a league final and most people believed in Milan. Not just because they played at home. The first game, at Stadio delle Alpi, had ended 0-0. But Milan had dominated and many viewed Milan as the best team in Europe, despite our strong line-up, and no one was really surprised when Milan advanced to the Champions League final again that spring. The odds were against us, they said, and things hadn't been made easier after our game against Inter.

It was April 20th, only a few days after my hat-trick against Lecce, and I had been praised by everyone, and Mino had warned me that I'd be heavily marked by Inter. I was the star, and Inter would have to try and block or psyche me out.

"If you're gonna survive, you have to respond with double strength. Otherwise you won't have a chance", Mino said, and I replied, as always:

"No problem. I like to play it rough."

But of course, it was nervous. There was an old hatred between Inter and Juventus and Inter had quite a brutal defense that season. One of them was Marco Materazzi. No one had received more red cards in Serie A than him. Materazzi was known to play aggressively and ugly. A year later he would become famous when he said some really bad things to Zidane during the World Cup final and got head butted in return. Materazzi was all about provoking and playing rough. He was called the butcher sometimes.

Inter also had Ivan Cordoba, a short but athletic Colombian, and Sinisa Mihajlovic. Mihajlovic was a Serb and there was a lot written about that, that it would be like a Balkan war. But that was bullshit. What happened on the pitch had nothing to do with the war. I and Mihajlovic became friends later in Inter and I have never cared at all where people are from. I don't give a shit about ethnic crap, and seriously, how could I? We're a mess in my family. Dad's a Bosnian, mom from Croatia, and the little brother has a dad who's a Serb. No, no, it had nothing to do with that.

But Mihajlovic was really tough. He was one of the best at shooting free kicks, and he was provoking all the time. He had called Patrick Viera "nero de merda", you black fuck, in a Champions League game and

there had been a police investigation and accusations about racism. Another time he had kicked and spat at Adrian Mutu who now just had started playing for us, and he had been suspended for eight games. He had a temper. He could blow up like a bomb. Not that I'm making a big deal of it, not at all. What happens on the pitch stays on the pitch. That's my philosophy, and honestly, you would be in shock if you knew what's going on out there, punches, insults, it's a constant fight, but for us players it's everyday life, and I'm just mentioning this thing with the Inter defenders so that you'll understand they're not guys you play around with. They could play rough and ugly, and I felt immediately, this is brutal; this is not just an ordinary game. There's hate, there are insults.

There was a lot of bullshit about my family and my honor, and I responded by hitting back hard. It was the only thing I could do. If you fold in a situation like that, you're crushed. It's about using your anger to give even more on the field, and I played extremely physical and tough. It shouldn't be easy facing Zlatan, not for a second, and by that time I had grown quite a bit. I wasn't the slender Ajax dribbler anymore. I was heavier and faster. I wasn't an easy catch, not at all, and afterwards Inter's coach Roberto Mancini said: "Ibrahimovic is a phenomenon, when he plays on this level, he's impossible to mark."

And the gods should know they tried, they gave me such hard tackles, and I was just as tough in return. I was a wild one. I was "Il gladiatore", as the newspapers said, and already in the fourth minute me and Cordoba smashed our heads against each other and collapsed both of us. I stood up feeling dizzy. Cordoba was bleeding and had to go off to get some stitches. He returned with a Band-Aid around his head and things didn't really calm down. Not at all! On the contrary, something serious was building up, and we were looking at each other with the darkest of eyes. It was a war. There were a lot of nerves and aggressiveness, and in the thirteenth minute I and Mihajlovic fell to the ground after a crash.

For a moment we were confused. Like, what happened? But then we realized we were sitting next to each other in the grass, and the adrenaline started flowing again, and he moved his head a bit. I responded by marking a head-butt, it probably looked pretty scary, it was my intention to act threatening, but I barely touched him. Believe me, if I had given him a real head-butt he wouldn't be standing up. It was more a simple touch, a way of showing: I'm not folding for you, you fuck! But Mihajlovic put his hand up his face and fell to the ground; it was a theatre act of course. He wanted me sent off. But I didn't even get a yellow card, not at that point.

The yellow card came a minute later in a fight with Favalli. It was all over an ugly rough game but I played well and was involved in practically all our chances, but Inter's goalie Francesco Toldo had a great game. He made save after save and we let one goal in. Julio Cruz headed in the net, and we tried everything we could to get back. It was close, but we didn't succeed and there was war and revenge in the air.

Cordoba wanted to get back at me and he kicked me on the hip and got a yellow. Materazzi tried to psyche me out and Mihajlovic continued with his bad mouthing and ugly tackles and I worked hard. I was pushing myself forward. I fought hard and had a good shot just before the halftime-break.

In the second half I had a long distance shot that hit the outside of the post, just up by the crossbar, and I had a free kick that Toldo saved with an incredible reflex.

But we didn't score, and with just one minute to go I was met by Cordoba again. We bounced into each other, and directly after, like in a reflex, I gave him a punch against his chin, or neck. Nothing serious, I thought, it was a part of the fight we were having, and the referee didn't see it. But it had some consequences. We lost, and only that was difficult. Like the league table looked, that loss could have cost us the scudetto.

But the Italian league's disciplinary committee reviewed the footage of my punch against Cordoba and decided to ban me for three games, and that was like a catastrophe. I would miss the final struggle in the league, and the deciding game against Milan on May 8th, and I thought I had been treated unfairly. "I'm not being treated fairly", I told the reporters. All the shit I had to put up with, and I'm the one being punished.

It was tough, and considering how important I was to the team it was a blow to the whole club, and the management appealed and called in star lawyer Luigi Chiappero. Chiappero had defended Juventus against the old doping charges and he claimed not only that my punch had come in a fight about the ball, but also that I had to put up with attacks and insults during the entire game. He even hired a lip reader who tried to figure out what Mihajlovic had yelled at me. But it wasn't easy. A lot of it was in serbian, so instead Mino went out and said Mihajlovic had said things that were too harsh to be repeated, stuff about my family and my mother. Mihajlovic responded "Raiola is just a pizza maker."

Mino had never made any pizzas. He had helped with other things at his parents' restaurant and he replied: "The best thing about Mihajlovic's statement is that he proves to us what we already knew, he is not intelligent. He doesn't even deny insulting Zlatan. He is a racist, and he has shown that before."

It was a mess. There were accusations back and forth, and Luciano Moggi, who wasn't afraid of anything, hinted at a conspiracy, a coup. The cameras that filmed my punch came from Mediaset, Berlusconi's company, and Berlusconi owned Milan, Didn't the footage reach the committee a bit too fast? Even the minister of the interior commented on things, and there were fights in the newspapers every day.

But nothing helped. The suspension was set, and I would miss the important game against Milan. It had been my season, and I wanted nothing else than being part of winning the league. But now I would see the game from the stands, and that was tough. The pressure was incredible and the bullshit continued from all directions, and now it wasn't just about my suspension. It was about many things, this and that. It was a circus.

It was Italy, and Juventus issued a "silenzio stampa". No one from the club was allowed to speak with media. Nothing, no more fighting about my suspension would interfere with the preparations. Everyone would be quiet and focus on the game which was viewed as one of the most important ones in Europe that season. Both we and Milan had 76 points then. It was a thriller. The game was the big topic in Italy and everyone agreed, also the bookmakers, Milan were the favorites. There were eighty thousand tickets sold, Milan played at home and I was suspended, I was looked upon as the most important player. Adrian Mutu was also suspended. Zebina and Tacchinardi were injured. We didn't have our best squad, and Milan had an amazing line-up. Defenders Cafu, Nesta, Stam and Maldini, and Kaka in midfield and Filippo Inzaghi and Shevchenko on top.

I had a bad hunch, and it wasn't fun reading in the papers that my outburst would cost us the victory in the league. "He must learn to behave himself, he must calm down," That kind of talk all the time, even from Capello, and it was fucking shit that I couldn't play the game.

But the squad was incredibly motivated. The anger over what had happened seemed to trigger everyone, and 27 minutes into the game Del Piero dribbled on the left wing and was stopped by Gattuso, the Milan guy who works harder than anyone else, and the ball flew high, and Del Piero ran after it. He hit a bicycle kick, and the ball flew into the box and found David Trézéguet who headed it in the net. But there was still a lot left of the game.

Milan began an incredible pressure, and eleven minutes into the second half Inzaghi was all clear. He shot and Buffon made a save, the ball bounced back to Inzaghi who got a new chance but was stopped on the line by Zambrotta.

There was chance after chance for both teams. Del Piero hit the crossbar and Cafu was calling for a penalty. Things happened constantly. But the result remained. It was 1-0 and all of a sudden we had an advantage for the league victory, and soon after that I got to play again. A weight was lifted off my shoulders and on the 15th of May we would face Parma at home at the Delle Alpi, and the pressure on me was huge. Not only because it would be my return after the suspension. Ten leading football papers had voted me as the third best attacker in Europe, after Shevchenko and Ronaldo, and there was even talk about me maybe getting the Ballon d'Or.

Either way many eyes would be on me, especially since Capello had put Trézéguet on the bench, the hero after the Milan game, and it felt like I was forced to perform. I had to be triggered, to a certain limit. There couldn't be any more outbursts or suspensions; everyone made that perfectly clear for me. Every

single camera at the stadium would be observing me, and when I went out on the field, I could hear the fans singing:

"Ibrahimovic, Ibrahimovic, Ibrahimovic."

There was like thunder around me, and I really was in the mood to play, and we scored 1-0, and later, in the 23rd minute, after a free kick by Camoranesi the ball came flying towards me in the box and I had been criticized for not being a good header despite my length.

Now I headed it with full force in the net, and it was wonderful. I was back, and only a few minutes before the final whistle, the result board at the stadium lit up; Lecce had equalized to 2-2 against Milan and the scudetto looked like ours.

If we just beat Livorno in the next round we would secure the victory! But we didn't even have to do that. On May 20th Milan lost a 3-1 lead against Parma, and we were the champions. People were crying in the streets in Turin, and we went by a roofless bus through the city. We could barely move forward. There were people everywhere, and everyone was singing and cheering and screaming. I felt like a little kid and we went out partying with the whole team, and I rarely drink. I have too many bad memories. But now I let it all go.

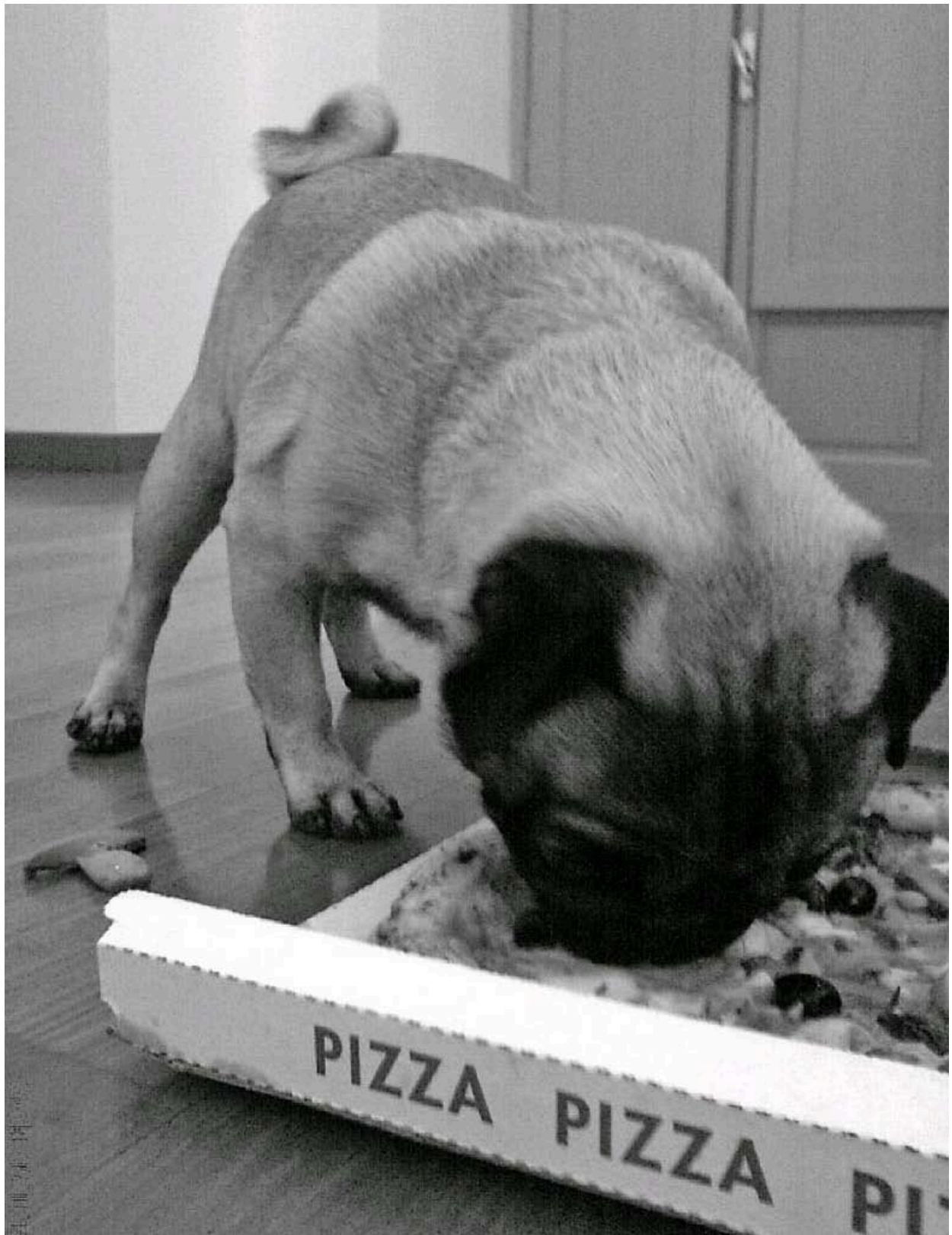
We had won the league, and it was crazy. No Swede had done that since Kurre Hamrin won with Milan in 1968, and there were no discussions about it, I had been very involved. I was voted the best foreign player of the league and the most important one in Juventus. The scudetto was mine, and I drank and drank, and the entire time David Trézéguet was pushing me. More vodka, more shots, he went on, he's French and quite withdrawn as a person, but he wants to be an Argentinean - he was born in Argentina - and now he let everything loose. Vodka here and vodka there. And I couldn't help myself I became piss drunk, and when I came home to Piazza Castello everything was spinning, and I thought: I'll take a shower, maybe that'll help. But everything kept spinning.

As soon as I moved my head the whole world followed, and in the end I fell asleep in the bathtub. Helena woke me up, just laughing at me. But I have told her not to ever tell anyone about what happened.

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One for Ibra, one for Helena, one for Hoffa



Ferrari, not the Enzo



## CHAPTER 14

Moggi was like he was, but people had respect for him, and it felt good to talk to him. He made things happen. He was straight forward. He had power and he understood things right away. When I was going to negotiate for my contract for the first time it was an important thing for me obviously. I was hoping for a better contract, and I really didn't want to provoke him, rather do the nice style and treat him like the big shot he was.

It was just that: I had Mino with me, and Mino doesn't exactly take a bow. He's insane. He just stepped into Moggi's office and sat on his chair and put his feet on the table in the most nonchalant way.

"For fuck sake", I said. "He'll come soon. Don't mess my contract up. Sit here with me."

"Go and fuck yourself and be quiet", he said, and honestly I hadn't expected anything else.

Mino is like that, and I knew that the guy could negotiate. He was a master at it. But I still got nervous that he might mess things up for me, and it really didn't feel good when Moggi stepped in with a cigar and the whole thing and roared:

"What the fuck, are sitting in my chair?"

"Sit down so that we can start talking!" And of course, Mino knew what he was doing; they knew each other, him and Moggi.

They had a whole story with disrespectful stuff like that, and I got a much better contract. But better yet I got a promise of another negotiation. If I continued to play good and if I remained as important I would become the best paid player, Moggi promised and I was satisfied. But then the mess started, and that was the first sign that something wasn't right.

The second year I often lived with Adrian Mutu at hotels and camps, and then I really didn't need to have a boring time. Adrian Mutu is Romanian, but he came to Italy and Inter 2000 already and he knew the

language and all that and was a big help for me. But the guy had also partied. The stories he had! I laid there in the hotel room and just laughed at all of them. It was sick. When he was bought by Chelsea he partied all the time. But of course it didn't work out for him in the long run. He got caught with cocaine in his blood and got fired by Chelsea and suspended and mixed up in a process with big indemnity. But when we lived together he had received treatment and was calm and clean again, and we could laugh at the whole incident. But you get it, I didn't have much to come with on that front. What was falling asleep in the bath tub once?

And now Patrick Vieira also arrived to the club, and I can tell you, it felt right away, this is a tough type, and it was certainly not a coincidence that we got in a fight at training. I don't exactly go for the weak ones. Against that type of persons I put hard against hard, and in Juventus I had become worse than ever. I was a warrior, and this time I was running on the field and Vieira had the ball.

"Give me the fucking ball", I shouted, and of course, I knew exactly who he was then.

Patrick Vieira had been Arsenal's captain. He had won three Premier League titles with the team and had become world champion and champion of Europe with France, he wasn't a nobody, not at all, but I shouted sharply at him. I was in a good spot, and I mean, this is football on the highest level, we're not supposed to wipe each other's asses.

"Shut up and run", he sputtered back.

"Just pass me the ball and I'll be quiet", I answered, and then we got into each other's faces, people had to take us apart.

But honestly, it was nothing, just evidence that we both were winners. You can't be kind in this sport. Patrick Vieira if anyone knew that. He's the type that gives everything in every situation, and I saw how he made the whole team better. There are not many football players today that I have such respect for. There was a wonderful quality in his game and it was incredible to have him and Nedved behind me in midfield, and I started my second season in Juventus well.

Against Roma I got a ball from Emerson just at the centre of the pitch, but I never took it down. I back heeled it over the Roma defender Samuel Kuffour. I hit it high and long because I saw that Roma's half of the pitch was empty, and I ran after it. I went away like an arrow and Kuffour tried to hang with me. But he didn't stand a chance, he pulled my shirt and fell, and I took the ball down on half volley, it bounced around my feet and the goal keeper, Doni, rushed out and then I shot the ball, bang, a hard shot that bombed into the goal. "Mama mia, what a goal", like I told the journalists afterwards, and it really looked like becoming a great year.

I got the golden ball in Sweden, the award to the best player of the year, and that was of course fun, but complicated. Aftonbladet arranged the event, and I had not forgotten. I stayed at home. Turin arranged the winter Olympics the next year. There were people everywhere and parties and concerts at Piazza Castello and at night me and Helena stood on the terrace and watched. We had it nice and decided to get children, or I don't know about decided. We just let it happen, you should plan such a thing, I believe. It should just happen. Who knows when you're ready? Sometimes we went to Malmö to visit my family. Helena had sold her farm then and we lived often at my mom's place, in the house I'd bought for her in Svågertork, and sometimes I played football on her lawn. One day I made a shot.

I hit the ball like hell, and the ball went through the fence. It made a hole and mom wanted to kill me obviously, that woman has a temper. "Now you'll just get out of here and buy me a new fence. Just go", she sputtered, and of course, in situations like this there's only one way out: you obey. I and Helena took the car to Bauhaus. But sadly, you couldn't buy separate boards. We had to take a whole fence, big as a little house, and I couldn't fit it into the car, not a chance. So I took it on my back and head for two kilometers. It was like when dad carried my bed, and I got there all done, but mom was happy, and that was the most important thing, and like I've said, we had it good.

But on the pitch I started to lose some of my flow. I started to feel too heavy. I was up in ninety eight kilo and all of it wasn't muscles. I had often eaten pasta two times a day, and that was too much I had learned, and I took the gym-training and diet down a notch and tried to get back to form. But there were some problems. What was Moggi's problem for example? Was he playing a game? I didn't get it.

We were going to negotiate a new contract. But Moggi delayed it. He came with excuses. He had always been a player full of tricks. But now he was totally hopeless. Next week, he said. Next month. There was always something. It was back and forth and eventually I got mad. I told Mino:  
"Fuck it. Let's sign it now! I don't want to argue anymore."

We had then gotten a deal that looked pretty good and I thought, it's enough now, I wanted to get rid of it. But even then nothing happened, or yeah, Moggi notified, fine, good, we'll sign in a couple of days. First we were going to play Champions League against Bayern. It was at home in Turin, and during the game I met a central defender named Valerien ismael. He was on me all the time, and after dragging me down in quite a dirty way I kicked him and got a yellow card. But it didn't stop there. In the ninetieth minute I was down in the penalty area and of course, I should have stayed calm. We were up two-one and the game was soon over. But I was irritated against Ismael and clipped him and got another yellow card. I was show out, and of course, Capello wasn't happy. He yelled. That was totally fine. It was unnecessary and stupid, and it was Capello's job to teach me a lesson.

But Moggi, what did have to do with it? He explained that my contract was no longer valid. I had blown my chance, he said and I got furious. Was I going to lose my deal because of one single mistake?

"Tell Moggi that I'll never sign a contract no matter what he gives me", I told Mino. "I want to be sold."

"Think of what you're saying", Mino said.

I had thought. And I refused to accept, and it meat war, nothing else. It was enough now, and that's why Mino went to Moggi, and said how it was: Watch out for Zlatan, he's stubborn, crazy, you'll risk losing him, and two weeks later Moggi really showed up with the contract. We hadn't believed anything else. He didn't want to lose me. But still, it wasn't over yet. Mino booked meetings. Moggi delayed them, and came with excuses. He was going to travel, it was this and that and I remember it so well: Mino called me.

"Something's not right", he said.

"What do you mean? What?"

"I can't put my finger on it. But Moggi is acting strange."

Soon it wasn't only Mino who knew about it. There was something in the air, and it wasn't about Lapo Elkann, even though that also was big. Lapo Elkann was the grand son to Gianni Agnelli. I had met him a couple of times. We didn't connect. A guy like that is on his own planet. He was a playboy and a fashion icon and had hardly anything to do with running Juventus. It was Moggi and Giraudo who ran things, not the owners. But of course, the kid was a symbol for the club and Fiat, and he was later listed as one of the best dressed in the world, and all that. His scandal became a big thing.

Lapo Elkann took an overdose of cocaine, and not with anyone: he took it with transsexual prostitutes in an apartment in Turin, and he was taken to hospital with an ambulance where he laid there in coma. The news was all over the place in Italy, and Del Piero and some more players went out in media and expressed their support, and of course, it had nothing to do with football. But afterwards it was still seen as the reason to the start of the catastrophe for the club.

Exactly when Moggi himself got to know about the suspicions I don't know. But the cops must have started to interrogate him way before the story exploded in media, and as I understand it, everything had started with the old doping scandal – the one that Juventus actually was discharged for. In relation with that the police had bugged Moggi's phone and then got to hear some things that didn't have to do anything with doping, but that still felt suspicious. Moggi had apparently tried to get the "right" referees to the Juventus games, and that's why the continued taping his phone, and apparently a lot if shit came forward, at least it seemed like that when all of it was put together, even though I myself don't give much for those evidence. Most of it was because Juventus was number one. I'm sure of that.

As always when someone is dominating, other want to drag them in the dirt, and it doesn't surprise me at all that the accusations came when we were winning the league. It looked bad, we got that right away. Media treated it like a world war. But it was bullshit, like I said, most of it. Referees favouring us? Come on! We had fought out there.

We had risked our legs and didn't fucking have the referees with us, not a chance. I had never had them on my side, honestly. I'm too big for that. If a guy slam in my I stand still, but if I rumble in him he flies four metres. I have my body and my playing style against me.

I have never been friends with the referee's, no one in our team were. No, no, we were the best and were going to be brought down. It was the truth, and there were also a lot of shady stuff in that inquiry. For example it was led by Guido Rossi, a guy with close ties to Inter, and Inter got strangely away from the entanglement.

A lot of it wasn't brought up or it was exaggerated so that Juventus could be the big bad guys. Milan, Lazio and Fiorentina and the referee union was also punished. But it was the worst for us because Moggi's phone was tapped upside down. Still the evidence didn't look so strong. Alright, it didn't really look good, that's true.

It sounded like Moggi was putting pressure on the Italian referee boss to get good guys to the games and you can hear how he yells at them who had been bad, for example someone named Fandel who was our referee in our fight against Djurgården. Some other referees had been said to been kept in the dressing rooms and got an ear full after we lost against Reggina in November 2004, and then it was a thing with the pope. The pope was dying. There wasn't going to be any games played then. The country was going to mourn their father. But it was said that Moggi even had called the domestic minister and asked for games to be played anyway, according to what's been said, it was because our opponent had two players injured and two suspended. I have no idea how much truth is in that. Stuff like this probably happen all the time in the branch, and honestly, who the fuck doesn't yell at the referees? Who doesn't work for their club?

It was a mess, it was called Moggiopoli often, like Moggigate, and of course my name came up. I hadn't expected anything else. Of course they would have brought in the best player as well. There were talks that Moggi had talked about my fight with van der Vaart and said something about me doing the right thing to get out from the club. The kid has balls, he said, or something of the sort. Some even said that he had encouraged me to get in a fight, and that got people interested of course. It would be a typical Moggi thing, the thought, and a typical Ibra thing as well probably. But it was bullshit of course. The fight was something between me and van der Vaart, and no one else.

But at the time you could say anything and on the morning of the eighteenth May I got a phone call. Me and Helena were in Monte Carlo then with Alexander Östlund and his family, and got to hear on the phone that the police was outside our door. The police wanted to come in. They had even orders to make a search in my apartment, and honestly, what could I do? I got out of there right away. I drove to Turin in an hour and met the cops outside, and I have to say, they were gentlemen. They were only doing their job. But that doesn't mean it was a pleasant thing. They were going to go through all my payments from Juventus, like I was a criminal or something, and they asked me if I had taken money under the table, and I told them like it was: "Never!" and then they looked around. Eventually I told them: "Is this what you're searching for?"

I gave them mine and Helena's bank papers and they were satisfied with that. They said thank you and good buy, like, we admire your game. Juventus management, Giraudo, Bettega and Moggi resigned in that time and it felt strange. They were crashed down in the shit. Moggi told the newspapers: "I miss my soul, it's been killed."

The next day the Juventus stock crashed in the Milano market and we had a crisis meeting in our gym, I won't ever forget it.

Moggi came down. On the surface he looked like usual, nice clothes and dominant. But it was some other Moggi. At that time some new scandal about his son had also been discovered, something about unfaithfulness, and he talked about it, and about how demeaning it was, and I remember that I agreed with him. It was personal stuff and didn't have anything to do with football. But it wasn't what touched me the most.

He started to cry, him of all people. I felt in my stomach. I had never seen him weak before. That man always had control. He had power all over him. But then... how can I explain? It wasn't a long time ago he had bossed me around and dismissed my contract and all that. But now suddenly I was supposed to feel sorry for him. The world was upside down and maybe I shouldn't have cared so much, and says something like: You have yourself to blame. But I really felt bad for Moggi. It hurt me to see a man like



him fall, and afterwards I thought a lot about that, and not the usual: "nothing can be taken for granted!" I was also starting to understand things better. Why did he delay our negotiations all the time? Why did he make such a fuss out of it?  
Was it to protect me?

I started to believe that. I didn't know. But I chose to interpret it like that. He had to know what was happening. He had to know that Juventus wasn't going to be the same team as before, and that I would have been fucked if he had tied me to the club. Then I would have been stuck with the club no matter what. I think that he thought about stuff like that. Moggi maybe didn't always put the brake on when it was red, or careful with every rule. But he was a skillful man when it came to his job, and he took care of his players, I know that, and without him my career and been at a dead end. I thank him for that, and when the whole world is criticizing him, I stand by his side. I liked Luciano Moggi.

Juventus was a sinking ship, and there were talks about the club being relegated to Serie B or Serie C. It was that level of craziness. But still you couldn't understand it, not right away. Were we who had built our team and won two league titles in a row lose everything because of something that didn't mean anything for our game? It was just too much, and it looked like it took some time before the management understood how serious it was. I remember a early call from Alessio Secco.

Alessio Secco was my old team manager. He was the one who had called me and booked the trainings: "We train tomorrow at ten! Be there on time." That type of talk! And now suddenly he was the new director, it was sick, and I had a tough time taking him seriously. But in the first call he gave me an opening:  
"If you get an offer, Zlatan, take it. That's my recommendation to you."

That was on the other hand the last kind thing I heard. After that they got tough and absolutely, you can understand that. One after one the players got away, Thuram and Zambrotta to Barcelona, Cannavaro and Emerson to Real Madrid, Patrick Vieira to Inter, and every one of us who were left called our agents: "Sell us, sell us. What are our options?"

There was desperation in the air. And I didn't hear more comments like the one from Alessio Secco. Now the club was fighting for its life.

The management did everything to keep us who were left and use every loop hole that was in the contracts. It was a nightmare. I was coming up in my career. I was having my break through. Would everything fall now? It was a worried time, and I felt more and more every day: I was going to fight. No way, I wasn't going to sacrifice a year in division two, if you can call it one year, it would be more, I understood that: one year to get back up, another year or two to get back to the top and get a CL spot, and even then we would probably not have a great team. My best years as a football player was being risked and I told Mino time after time:

"Do whatever you can. Take me away from here."

"I'm working on it."

"You better."

It was the June of 2006. Helena was pregnant and I was happy for it. The child was supposed to come at the end of September, but other than that I was in a no man's land. What was going to happen? I didn't know a thing. At this time I was at camp with the NT before world cup that was going to be held in Germany that summer. The whole family was going to be there; mom, dad, Sapko, Sanela, her husband and also Keki, and as usual I was the one who was going to fix everything, with hotel, travels, money and rental cars and all that.

I got on my nerves pretty early, and in the last minute my dad dropped out, it was the usual thing, and there was a lot of fuss about his tickets: What should we do with them? Who's going to get them instead? No one can say that I got more balanced by all this, and I also started to feel my groin, the same shit that I was operated for in Ajax, and I talked with the NT management about it.

But we decided that I was going to play. I have a fundamental principle; if I play bad I don't blame any injuries. It's just silly. I mean, if you're not good because of an injury, why are you playing then? It gets

wrong no matter how you answer. You just have to suck it up and keep going, but it's true, it was unusually hard at that time, and at the fourteenth of July the last sentence came from Italy. They took two league titles from us and we lost our CL spot, but above all: we were relegated to Serie B and were going to start the season with a bunch of minus points, maybe as much as thirty and I was still on the sinking ship.

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## CHAPTER 15

Earlier, in September 2005, we had played against Hungary in the World Cup qualifications at the Ferenc Puskas-Stadium in Budapest. We were more or less forced to win if we were to qualify for the World Cup, and the pressure had been building the days before the game. But it seemed to become an anti-climax. Nothing was happening, and I couldn't get into the game. I was tired and out of form and when we had played full time, it was 0-0 and everyone just waited for the final whistle.

Some papers had given me a 1 rating. I was a disappointment, and many probably saw that as a confirmation: He's just an overrated diva, after all. But then I got a pass inside the box, from Mattias Jonson I think, and it didn't seem like I was doing much with that one either. I had a defender hanging on me and I started dribbling back out on the field without gaining something from that. But then I turned back, like BAM, because don't forget, it's for situations like that I play, and that's why I often seem to be just walking around. I save myself to be able to run on fast, aggressive things, and now I took a few quick steps towards the sideline, and the defender couldn't keep up at all, and I came in position to shoot, not a good position though. The angle was too tight and the goalie was positioned well, and most people expected a pass.

But I went for it and few goals are made from that angle. At best it hits the side of the net, and the goalie didn't react. He didn't even raise his hands and for a second I thought I had missed. And I wasn't the only one. The audience didn't react, and Olof Mellberg hung with his head, like: shit, so close, and on extra time. He even turned around. He was waiting for the goalie to kick in the ball again, and on the other side, Andreas Isaksson in our goal was thinking: It's too quiet, and Olof look disappointed. The ball must have gone outside, in the side of the net. But then I raised my arms and ran around the goal and the stadium woke up.

The ball hadn't hit the side at all. It had gone in by the crossbar from an impossible angle and the goalie hadn't even been given the time to react, and not much later the referee whistled the game off, and no one gave me a 1 rating anymore.

The goal became a classic and we qualified for the World Cup and I really hoped it would be a success. I needed it, and really, it felt good down there at our WC camp in Germany, despite the chaos in Juventus. After Tommy Söderberg quit we had a new second coach, and it wasn't just anyone. It was Roland Andersson, who once said: "It's time to stop playing with the young shits, Zlatan", he who once took me up and into the first team, and honestly, I was moved. I hadn't seen him since he was kicked out of MFF, and it felt good being able to show him: You were right, Roland, betting on me was worth it. He had gotten some critique for that. But now we were here, me and Roland. It had worked out for the both of us, and the mood and atmosphere was good all over. There were Swedish supporters all over and everywhere you could hear that song the young kid sings, you know: "No one kicks the ball like him, Zlatan, I said Zlatan, I love you Ich liebe dich, Zlatan Ibrahimovic".

That was a nice groove. But my groin wasn't feeling well, and my family was fighting. It was crazy, really. No matter how much younger brother I am - only Keki is younger - I've become like the dad to all of them and here in Germany it was always about something. It was dad who didn't want to come, and now his tickets weren't being used, it was the hotel which was too far away, or my older brother, Sapko, who needed money and when he received it couldn't handle exchanging it. At the same time Helena was seven months pregnant. She took care of herself, but there was chaos and commotion around her. When

she was going off the bus before our game against Paraguay our fans were all over her like crazy and she felt unsafe and flew home the next day. It was this and that all the time, big things and small.

"Please, Zlatan, can you do this for me?"

I was the travel guide for the family in Germany and I couldn't focus on my game. The phone was ringing constantly. There were complaints and lots of stuff. It was insane. I was playing the fucking World Cup. And still I had to take care of rental cars and shit, and I probably shouldn't have played at all. My groin was trouble, like I said. But Lagerbäck was sure. I would play, and the first game was against Trinidad & Tobago, and of course we should win, not by one goal, but by three, four, five. But nothing worked for us. Their goalie was having the game of his life, and we didn't even score when they had a guy sent off. The only positive thing about that game happened afterwards. I got to meet their coach.

The coach's name was Leo Beenhakker. It was amazing to see him again. My God, many want to take credit for my career. Almost everything is bullshit, silly attempts from people who want to gain from my name, but some guys have really meant a lot. Roland Andersson is one and Beenhakker another one. They believed in me when everyone else was in doubt. I hope being able to do things like that when I'm older. Not just whine about those who are different: Look, now he's dribbling again, he's doing this and that, but actually think a bit ahead.

There's a photo from that meeting with Beenhakker. I've taken off my shirt and my face shines, despite the disappointment from the game. I never really got going in that tournament. We got a draw against England, and that was good. But Germany crushed us in the round of 16 and I played like shit, and I really take all the blame for that. A family is a family. You take care of each other. But I shouldn't have been a travel guide and the tournament became a lesson for me too. Afterwards I explained to everyone: "You're welcome to hang along, and I'll try arrange things well for you, but once you're there, you take care of your own problems and yourselves."

I returned to Turin and it didn't feel like home anymore. Turin had become a place I had to leave, and the atmosphere in the club hadn't exactly improved. There had been another disaster.

Gianluca Pessotto had been a defender in the club all since 1995. He had won everything with the club, identified himself with Juventus. I knew him quite well. We had played together for two years and the guy wasn't really the cocky kind. He was incredibly sensitive and nice and always stayed in the background. Exactly what happened after that, I don't know.

Pessotto had just quit as a player and become the new team manager after Alessio Secco, who had been promoted to director, and maybe it wasn't easy getting an office job after a life as a player. But more than anything, Pessotto had taken the gambling scandal and the relegation to Serie B very hard, and also some things had happened with his family.

One of those days he was sitting in his office, four floors up, just as usual. But this day he stepped up, into one of the windows with a rosary in his hand, and threw himself out, backwards, and landed on the asphalt between two cars. The fall was 15 meters. It's amazing that he survived! He wound up in the hospital with some fractures and inner bleedings, but he made it, and people were happy about that, despite everything. But still, his suicide attempt was seen as another thing of concern. It was like: Who's the next one to lose it?

Everything felt quite desperate, and the new president, Giovanni Cobolli Gigli, also explained: we are not letting any more players leave. The management would fight for every single one, and of course I talked to Mino about this. We discussed it all the time, and we both agreed, there was only one way. We had to strike back. So Mino went to the media and said:

"We're prepared to take any legal means necessary to get away from this club."

We didn't wanna appear weak, not a chance. If Juventus played hard ball, so would we. But it wasn't a simple war. A lot was at stake, and I talked to Alessio Secco again, the guy who tried to be the new Moggi, and I instantly heard, his opinion was different now:

"You have to stay in this club. We demand that. You have to show loyalty with the team."



"Before the break you said the opposite. That I should take any offers."

"But the situation is different now. We're in crisis. We will offer you a new contract."

"I'm not staying", I said. "Under no conditions."

By every hour, every day, the pressure was increasing, and of course it was unpleasant, and I fought with everything I had, with Mino, with the law, with everything. But it's true. I couldn't be too defiant. I still got my salary from the club, and of course the big question was: how far could I go? I spoke with Mino about it.

We decided that I would train with the team, but not play any matches. According to Mino there was a foundation for doing so in the contract, so that's why I, despite everything, went with all the others to a pre-season camp in the mountains. The Italian national team players hadn't come back yet, they were still in Germany. Italy went all the way and won the World Cup. That was insanely strong by the team, I think, considering the scandals going on at home, so it was only to congratulate them. But that didn't exactly help me. Our new coach was Didier Deschamps. He was an old player too, French. He had been the captain when France won the World Cup in 1998, and now at his new job he was forced to get Juventus back to Serie A immediately. It was a tremendous pressure on him, and already during the first day in training he came up to me:

"Ibra", he said.

"Yes?"

"I want to build our game around you. You are my most important player. You are the future. You have to help us back."

"Thanks, but..."

"No buts. You have to stay here. I won't accept anything else", he continued, and even though it didn't feel good, I heard how important I was to him, I continued my own plan:

"No, no, no. I'm leaving."

I shared room with Nedved at the camp. Nedved and I were friends. Both of us had Mino as agent. But we were in different situations. Nedved, just like Del Piero, Buffon and Trézéguet had decided to stay in Juventus and I remember clearly how Deschamps came up to us, maybe to have us act out against each other, I don't know. But he wasn't going to give up.

"Listen", he said. "I have great expectations on you, Ibra. You are the main reason I took this job."

"Get out", I said. "You took the job for the club, not for me."

"I promise. If you leave, I will leave", he continued, and then I couldn't help smiling, after all.

"OK man, pack your bags and call a cab", I replied, and then he laughed like if I had been joking.

But I had never been so far from a joke in my life. If Juventus were fighting for its life as a major club, I was fighting for my life as a player too. One year in Serie B would make everything stop, and one of those days Alessio Secco and Jean-Claude Blanc came to me. Jean-Claude was a Harvard guy, a hot shot that the Agnelli family had taken in to save Juventus from disaster, and of course he had been accurate about things. He had his papers in order and had written a proposal for a contract with different amounts, and I immediately thought: Don't even read it! Make fuzz later! The more trouble you make, the more they want to let you go.

"I don't even want to see it. I'm not signing anything", I replied.

"Please at least look at what we're offering. We're being very generous!"

"Why? It won't lead anywhere."

"You don't know that before you've looked at it."

"Sure I do. Even if you offer me twenty million euros, it's totally uninteresting for me."

"That's respect less of you", Blanc hissed.

"Take it any way you want to", I said, and left, and sure I knew I had hurt him, and that's always a risk, and in a worst case scenario I would be without a club in September.

But I had to play the game and take some risk. I had to move on, and sure, my position for negotiation wasn't the best anymore. I had a bad World Cup, and hadn't been too great the previous season in Juventus either. I had been too heavy, and scored too few goals. But still I hoped that people knew my capacity. Only the year before I had been great, and voted the best foreign player in the league. I thought there must be some interest amongst the clubs, and Mino was working hard behind the scenes.

"I have Inter and Milan interested", he said at an early stage, and that sounded good of course. Some light in the tunnel.

But it was just loose talk at that point, and I still didn't know what my situation with contracts and Juve looked like. What were my possibilities to get out of there if they refused to let me go? I wasn't sure, and it was up and down every day. Mino was optimistic. That was his job, and I couldn't do anything but wait, and fight. The media already knew that I wanted to leave at any price. And now also info came that Inter were interested in me, and the Juventus supporters really hate Inter, and as a player you are always surrounded by fans. They hang outside the training grounds wanting autographs and often they can pay to get in and watch. It's business everywhere in this sport, and then, during pre-season way up in the mountains they were there, screaming at me.

"Traitor and pig", they screamed and things like that, and sure, that wasn't nice.

But honestly, you're used to almost everything as a player, and those words just went through me. We were playing a practice game against Spezia, and what had I said about games? I wouldn't play them. So I sat there in my room, playing PlayStation. And outside was the bus which would take us to the stadium and everyone was already downstairs, also Nedved, and I think the bus had the engine running. Where the fuck is Ibra? They waited and waited and finally Deschamps came up to my room. He was furious.

"Why are you sitting here? We are leaving!"

I didn't even turn around, just kept playing.

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Didn't YOU hear me?" I replied. "I will train, but I won't play any games. I've told you ten times."

"Of course the fuck you do. You are part of this team. You're coming NOW. Get up."

He stepped right up to me but I just sat there, kept playing.

"What kind of fucking respect is that, sitting here playing?" he screamed. "You will be fined for this, you hear?"

"Okay."

"What okay?"

"Give me fine. I'll stay here!"

And then he left. He was going insane, and I was sitting there with my PlayStation while the others left on that bus, and if things weren't tense before, they became tense now. The incident was reported upwards of course. I was fined, thirty thousand euros I think. It became a war, and like in all wars, tactics were the most important thing. How would I strike back? What's the next step? I was thinking and thinking.

I had secret visitors. Ariel Braidà, a hot shot from Milan, came to see me during the camp. I just snuck away and met him at a hotel nearby, and we talked about what it would be like to be a part of Milan. But to tell you the truth, I didn't really like his style. It was a lot like: "Kaka is a star. You're not. But Milan can turn you into one." It was like I needed Milan more than Milan needed me, and I didn't really feel seen or wanted, and I had liked to have said thanks and goodbye at once, but my position for negotiations was far from perfect. I desperately wanted to get away from Juventus. I didn't have a good hand and I had to return to Turin without any good offers.

It was hot. It was August and Helena was more pregnant than ever, and had some signs of stress. There were paparazzi after us all the time, and I supported her as much as I could. But I was in no man's land. I didn't know anything about the future, and nothing was easy. The club had a new training facility. Everything that had to do with Moggi was to be cleaned out, even his old locker room, and I continued training. I had to stick to mine. But it was strange. No one viewed me as part of the team, and the drama continued. Things happened all the time, and at least I noticed one good thing: Juventus weren't fighting for me as much as before.

Who wants a guy who doesn't give a fuck and just plays PlayStation?

It was still a long way to go, and the question was still: Inter or Milan? It should have been an easy choice. Inter hadn't won the league for seventeen years. Inter weren't really a top club anymore. Milan was one of the most successful clubs in Europe. Of course you're going to Milan, Mino said. I wasn't as sure. Inter was Ronaldo's old team and the club really showed they wanted me, and I kept thinking of

what Braida had said to me up there in the mountains: "You're not a real star yet!" Milan had the strongest team. But still I leaned towards Inter. I wanted the underdog.

"OK", Mino said. "Just remember that Inter will be a totally different challenge. You won't get any scudetti for free there."

I didn't want anything for free. I wanted challenges and responsibility. That feeling grew stronger, and already then I understood what it would mean coming to a club that hadn't won the league in seventeen years and then would do it with me. That would raise things to a whole new level. But, nothing was done or settled yet, and first of all we had to get something done, anything! We had to leave the sinking ship and grab on to what we could.

Milan would play qualifications for the Champions League then. It was a result of Calciopoli. Normally they'd be playing it of course, but since the courts had given them minus-points they had to play a qualifier against Red Star Belgrade. The first game was at San Siro in Milan. It was an important game for me too. If Milan would qualify they would also get more money to buy players, and Adriano Galliani, the vice president of Milan, had told me:

"We wait and see the outcome of this, and then we'll get back to you."

Until then Inter had been more interested, but they weren't playing it simple either. Inter was owned by Massimo Moratti. Moratti is a big shot. He's an oil tycoon. He owned the club and of course he could also sense my desperation. He had lowered his bid four times. There was always something, and on August 8th I was sitting in our apartment at Piazza Castello in Turin.

Milan's game against Red Star started at 20.45. I didn't watch it. I had other things to do. But apparently Kaka assisted Filippo Inzaghi early in the game for 1-0, and some of the tension in the club let go. Shortly after that my phone rang. It had been ringing all day, and most of the times it was Mino. He kept me updated about every little step in the process, and now he told me that Silvio Berlusconi wanted to meet with me, and I flinched of course. Not just because it was him, but because it showed that the club was seriously interested. But still I wasn't sure. Inter was still my first choice. But of course I understood that this conversation wouldn't exactly hurt us.

"Can we use this?" I said.

"You bet we can", Mino replied, and instantly called Moratti, because if there's anything that gets that man going it's beating Milan.

"We just wanted to inform you that Ibrahimovic is having a late dinner with Berlusconi in Milan", Mino said.

"What?"

"They have reserved a table at Restaurant Giannino."

"So the fuck they have", Moratti answered. "I'll send a guy over right now."

Moratti sent Branca. Marco Branca was a sporting director at Inter. He was kind of a young skinny guy, but when he knocked on our door only an hour later I learned another thing about him. He was one of the worst chain smokers I've ever met. I walked back and forth in our apartment and filled an ashtray in no time. But he was stressed. He was forced to close a deal before Berlusconi tied his tie and left for dinner at the Giannino. So of course, he was stressed. He was about to screw the most powerful man in Italy on a deal, nothing less, and of course Mino used that. He likes it when the counterpart is under pressure. Pressure makes people softening, and there were different phone calls and numbers thrown in the air all the time. It was my contract. My conditions, and the clock kept ticking and Branca kept smoking and smoking.

"Do you accept?" he said.

I looked at Mino.

Mino said: "Go for it!"

"Ok, sure."

Branca started smoking even more, and then he called Moratti. You could really hear the excitement in his voice.

"Zlatan accepted", he said.

That was good news. It was big. You could hear that in his voice. But nothing was set yet. Now it was down to the deal between the two clubs. What was my price? It was a new game, and of course, if Juventus would lose me, they would demand good payment. But before anything was set, Moratti called.

"Are you happy?"

"I am happy", I said.

"Then I'd like to welcome you", and you get it, I had a sigh of relief.

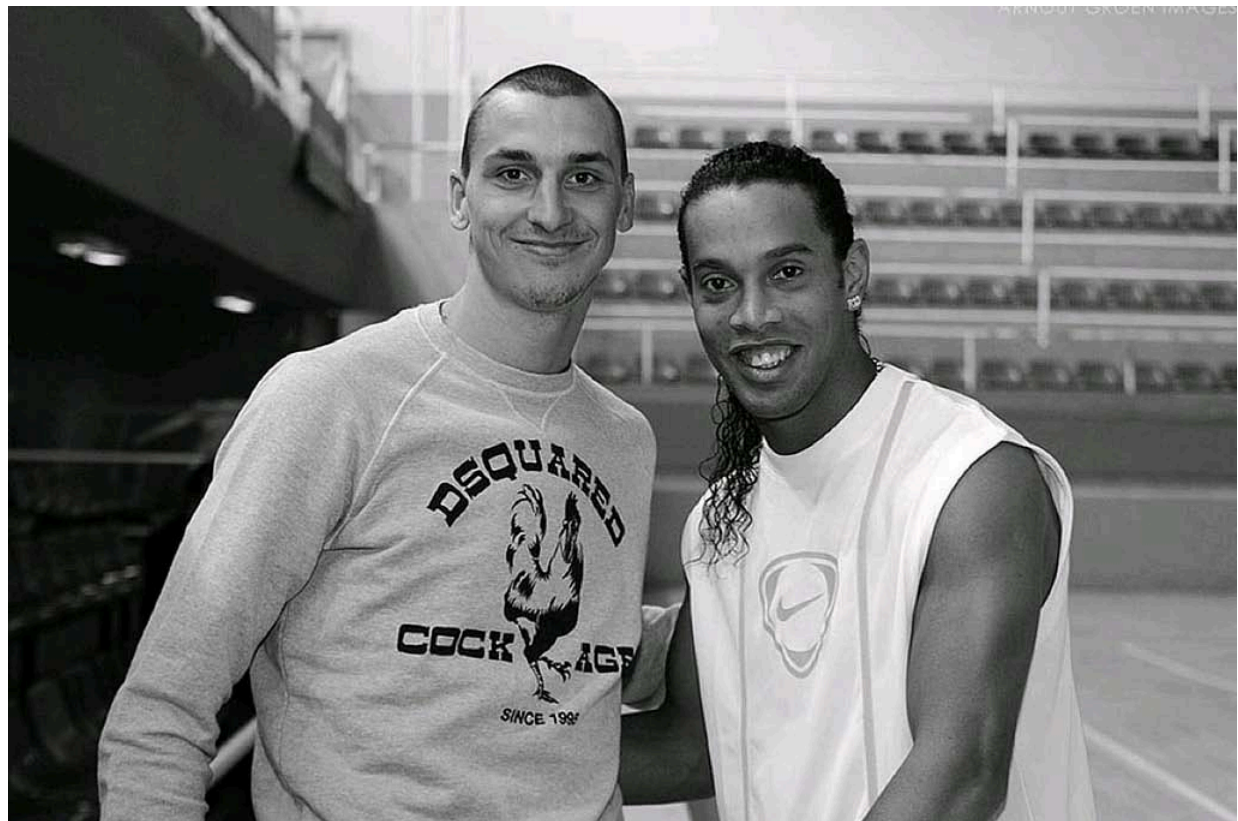
All the uncertainty of the past spring and summer was like swept away in a single second, and now Mino only had to call the management of Milan. Berlusconi probably didn't want to go to dinner anymore. We weren't exactly going to talk about the weather, and if I had understood everything correctly the Milan guys were really caught off guard: What the fuck is happening? Is Ibra going to Inter now?

"Sometimes things happen fast", Mino said.

I was eventually bought for twenty seven million euros, it was the biggest transfer in Serie A that year, and I never had to pay that fine I had gotten for playing PlayStation. Mino made it disappear and Moratti went to the media and said my transfer was of the same importance as when the club had bought Ronaldo, and of course that struck my heart. I was ready for Inter. But first I was going to a national team game in Gothenburg and I was counting on an easy ride before the real thing would begin again.

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A photo from the book not mentioned in the text. Ibra was in Barcelona doing a film session for Nike and asked the Nike people to have him meet Ronaldinho, one of his heroes. From his time in Juve



## CHAPTER 16

We played a NT game against Latvia and won with one-zero. Kim Källström scored the goal and on the next day we had the day off. It was the third September. Olof Mellberg had his twenty ninth birthdays. He was a captain of Aston Villa. We had met in the NT, and in the beginning he was very quiet, I thought, a bit like Trezeguet, but he opened up and we became friends. Now he wanted me and Chippen to go out with him and celebrate, and absolutely, why not?

We wound up on a place in Avenyn (ed note: main street in Gothenburg) that had photos on the walls. The newspapers described it as an "in place". Every nightclub that I've been to becomes in place's. But it was worthless. It was almost empty. We were almost alone and we sat there and took a drink in peace. It wasn't more fun than that, and the time was eleven in the evening. We were supposed to be at the hotel at eleven in the evening, according to the NT rules. But what the hell, we said. Don't have to be that careful with the time. We had been out before and got back late without anyone making a big fuss out of it. Besides it was Olof's birthday and we were sober and decent, and quarter past twelve we were back at the hotel and went to bed like good boys. That was the whole thing. My friends from Rosengård would not even have listened if I would try to tell them the story. It was nothing, honestly.

It's just one problem. I can't go out to buy milk without the papers knowing about it. I have spies on me wherever I go. People send text messages and take pictures. I saw Zlatan there and there, oh, oh, and to make it not so boring you exaggerate and tell the friends who in their turn exaggerates a little bit more. It must be cool, at least a little bit. It's in the package, and most of the time I have people who stand up for me: What kind of talk is that? Zlatan hasn't done shit. But this time the papers were a bit smarter.

They turned it around and called our team manager, but didn't ask about us and when we arrived to the hotel, except they asked what the rules were. He said like it was: everyone should be at the hotel at eleven.

"But Zlatan, Chippen and Mellberg came back later. We have witnesses", the journalists said and absolutely, the team manager is a good guy, he usually defends us. But this time he wasn't fast enough in the head, and maybe you can't expect it either. Who says the right stuff all the time?

But if he'd been smart and done like the guys in the Italian teams, he'd asked the journalists if he could get back at them and called later to give a good explanation to why we had been out a little bit longer, like for example that we had permission, something like that, not saying that we should avoid punishment, not at all. But the fundamental principle should always be that you stay tight as a group. We're a team, we're one, and then they can punish us internally as much as they want.

But the team manager answered that no one was supposed to be out after eleven and that we must have broken the rules. After that everything went to hell. They called me in the morning: "You're called to a meeting with Lagerbäck", and indeed, I don't like meetings. But on the other hand I have some sort of experience for it. I got called to meeting even in preschool. It was a normal thing for me. It was my life, and this time I knew what it was about. It was bullshit, and I took it calmly. I called one of the security guys that I know who usually know things.

"How is it looking?"

"I think you'll have to pack your bags", he said, and I didn't understand a thing.

Pack my bags? Because I've been a little late? I refused to believe it. But then I accepted the situation. What else could I do? I packed, and didn't even make up any explanations. The situation was too silly for it. The truth had to do for once. I wasn't even going to blame my brother. I just got in there and Lagerbäck and the whole gang was there and also Mellberg and Chippen. They weren't as cool as me. They weren't as accustomed to it. But I felt at home. I was almost as I had missed it, like I'd been too good and should have lived more on the edge!

"We've decided to send you home at once", Lagerbäck said. "What do you have to say about it?"

"I'm sorry", Chippen said. "It was really a stupid thing to do."

"I'm sorry too", Mellberg said. "But... how will you speak to the media about it?" he continued, and there was a lot of talk about that, and during the whole discussion I sat there quietly. I had nothing to say and Lagerbäck maybe saw it as something strange. I'm not really the shy guy.

"And what about you, Zlatan. What do you say?"

"I'm saying nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Nothing!"

I noticed right away, they got nervous. I would probably have been more comfortable if I'd been cocky. It would have been my style. But this was something new to them. Nothing! They got like stressed by it: What's Zlatan planning now? And the more stressed they became, the calmer I felt. It was kind of strange. My silence messed with the balance. I got an advantage. Everything felt so familiar. It was Wessels department store again. It was the school. It was MFF's junior team and I listened to Lagerbäck's little speech about how clear they'd been about their rules with the same interest that I'd listened to the teachers in school, like: You just keep talking, I don't care. But it's true, one thing pissed me off. It was when he said:

"We have decided that you won't be playing against Liechtenstein", and don't think that I cared about that, I had for fuck sake already packed my bags. Lagerbäck could have sent me to Kiruna and I wouldn't have whined about it and honestly, who cares about Liechtenstein? It was the word we that pissed me off. Who the hell were we?

He was the boss. Why did he hide behind others? He should have been man enough and said "I have decided", then I would have respected him for it, but this, this was cowardly, and I looked him straight in the eyes with a fierce look, but I was still not saying a thing, and afterwards I went up to my room and called Keki. In situations like this you need the family.

"Come and get me!"

"What have you done?"

"I was late."

Before I left I talked to the team manager. He and I had always a good relationship. He knew me better than most in the NT and knew my background, and my nature. He knows that I don't forget easily. "Hey Zlatan", he said. "I'm not worried for Chippen and Mellberg. They're ordinary Swedish guys, they'll take their punishment and come back, but with you Zlatan... I'm afraid that Lagerbäck is digging his own grave."

"We'll see", I just answered, and in an hour I was gone from the hotel. Me and the little brother took Chippen in the car with us. It was him, me, Keki and one of my friends, and we stopped at a gas station. They we saw the news bill's.

It must have been the biggest stir for a late arrival ever! It was like an UFO had landed and it was only going to get worse, and the whole time I stayed in touch with Chippen and Mellberg. I was kind of like a dad for them:

"Take it easy, guys. This will only become a merit. No one likes good boys."

But honestly, I became more and more annoyed about the whole thing. Lagerbäck and the others did this we against them- thing. It was so ridiculous. For not so long ago I got in a fight with a guy in Milan, Oguchi Onyewu is his name. I'll tell more about it later, it was kind of brutal. No one thought the fight was a good thing. But outwards the management defended me and said that it was good that I was hot and triggered something like that. They held the team together. But here we became good guys and bad guys. It was badly managed, and I also said that to Lars Lagerbäck:

"This is forgotten for me", he said. "You're welcomed back."

"Am I? But I won't come. You could have given me a fine. You could have done anything. But you went to the media and hanged us out there. I don't buy that" and that was that.

I said no to the NT, and the thing disappeared from my head. Or I don't know about disappearing, I was reminded of it all the time, and there was one thing I regretted. I should have made a scandal with more class now that I was thrown out. What the hell, to sit at an empty place with one drink, and come one hour too late? What was that? I should have trashed a bar and crashed a car in the fountain up there in Avenyn and wobbled home in my underwear. That would have been a scandal on my level. This was nonsense.

You don't ask for respect. You take it. It's easy to become small when you're new in a club. Everything is new, and everyone has their roles and positions and their talk. The easiest way is to lean back and get a feeling of the atmosphere. But that way you'll lose the initiative. You lose time. I came to Inter to make a difference and make sure that the club won the league for the first time in seventeen years. For that you can't be shy, or become careful, just because the media criticize you had people have preconceived opinions about you. Zlatan is a bad boy. Zlatan have problems with his temper, and all that. It's easy to be affected, and try to prove that you're the opposite, the good guy. But then you let yourself be handled.

It wasn't perfect that the event in Gothenburg was up in every paper in Italy in that moment. Like look, the guy doesn't care about rules, and he's so expensive. Isn't he overrated? Or a bad buy? It was a lot of that. The worst of them was a so called Swedish expert, he said:

"The way I see it Inter have always made strange buys, they just go for the individualists... now they've bought another problem."

But like I said, I thought of Capello's words. You have to take respect. It was like stepping into a new enclosure in Rosengård. You can't back down, or care if someone has heard this or that about you. You have to take a step forward instead, and I did that thing with the attitude I got from Juventus: Hey, guys, here am I and now we'll start winning.

I played with black eyes in training. I had a winner and wild mentality and will. I was worse than ever. I got mad if someone didn't do his best on the field. I yelled and that entire if we lost or played a bad game, and in a whole other way in my life I had a leader role. I saw it in people's eyes; it was on me now. I was going to bring them forward, and by my side I had Patrick Vieira again. With him by your side you can do a lot. We were two winning monsters who gave everything to raise the motivation of the team.

But the club had problems. Moratti, the president and owner, had done a lot of things for Inter. He has spent over three hundred million Euros on players. He has invested in guys like Ronaldo, Maicon, Crespo, Christian Vieri, Figo and Baggio. He has ventured extremely offensively. But he had also another attribute. He was too generous, and kind. He could give us big bonuses after one single win, and I reacted on that. Not that I have anything against bonuses. Who does? But these bonuses weren't given after a league- or cup victory. It was after single games, a game that maybe wasn't even important.

It gave the wrong signals, according to me, and sure, as a player you don't step up to Moratti just like that. Moratti is from a nice finance family. He's power. He's money. But I had been given such a position in the club that I did it anyway. Moratti is not a difficult person. He's easy to talk to, and I said to him:

"You!"

"Yes, Ibra?"

"You have to take it easy."

"In what way?"

"With the bonuses. The guys can become satisfied. Damn, one win, that's nothing. We get paid to win and absolutely, if we get the Scudetto, give us something nice if you want to, but not after one single win!"

He got it. It came to an end, and don't misunderstand me, I didn't think that I could run the club better than Moratti, not at all. But if I saw something that was a negative influence on the motivation I pointed it out, and the thing with the bonuses was just a little thing. The real challenge was the alignments. That bothered me from day one, and it wasn't only because I was from Rosengård, where everyone got on in a mess, the Turks, the Somalian, the Yugoslavs, the Arabs. It was also because I'd seen it so clear in football, both in Juventus and in Ajax: every team performs better when the players stick together. In Inter it was the other way around. Over there the Brazilians sat in a corner. The Argentineans in another, and then the rest of us in the middle. It was so shallow, so flaccid.

Alright, sure alignments happen in the clubs. It's not good but it happens. But then at least people chose their friends, and go after the people they get along with. Here they went after nationality. It was so primitive. They played football together. But then they lived in different worlds, and that made me furious and I got it right away, this needs to change. Or else we won't win the league. Some maybe said: What does it matter who we eat lunch with? Believe me, it mattered. If you don't stick together outside the pitch you'll notice it in the game.

It affects the motivation and team spirit. In football there's a small margin and stuff like that can be decisive, and I saw it as my first big test to end all that. But I noticed, talking wasn't enough.

I walked around and said: What is this silliness? Why do you sit there in groups like little children? And absolutely, many agreed with me. Others got a little embarrassed, but nothing happened. The habits were strong. Those invisible barriers were too sharp. That's why I went to Moratti again, and this time I was as clear as I could. Inter hadn't won the league in ages. Would it continue like this? Would we be losers just because people didn't talk to each other?

"Of course not", Moratti said.

"Then we have to break these alignments. We can't win the league if we don't function as a team."

I don't think that Moratti knew how bad it was, but he understood my reasoning. It was a part of his philosophy, he said.

"We must be like a big family in Inter. I will talk to them", and not much later he came down to the guys, and you could tell right away what kind of respect the guys had for him.

Moratti was the club. He didn't just say how things were. He owned us as well. He held a little speech. He was burning and talked about staying together and everyone looked at me of course. It sounded like my words. Is it Ibra who has talked? Most of them were probably assured of that. I didn't care. I just wanted the team to stick together and the atmosphere also became better, step by step. The alignments were broken and everyone started to hang out with each other.

We became much more hungry and welded as a group and I went around and talked to everyone and tried to herd everyone together even more. But of course, winning the league wasn't easy just because of that. I remember my first game. It was against Fiorentina in Florence. It was in 2006, and Fiorentina obviously wanted to beat us at every price. That team had also been dragged into the scandal and started the league with minus fifteen points, and the crowd at Artemio Franchi-stadium was hateful.

Inter had gotten away completely from the scandal, and many people thought that sucked. Both of us were whipped to win; Fiorentina because they wanted to restore their honour and we because we wanted to gain respect at once to finally be able to get the Scudetto.

I played from start with Hernan Crespo in attack. Crespo was an Argentinean who came from Chelsea and we got a good start together, at least on the field, and sometime in the second half I got a long pass in the penalty area and shot a half volley in goal, and you know. It was such a release! It was my debut and after that I grew in the team more and more, and it felt right to say no to the NT for the EC-qualifications against Spain and Island. I wanted to invest time in Inter and the family. Helena and I were counting the days then. We were going to have our first child, and we had made up our minds, it was going to happen in Sweden at Lunds Hospital. We trusted the Swedish medical service more, after all. But it wasn't easy. There were some problems.

It was the media, and the paparazzi. It was the whole hysteria and we brought along security personnel, and informed the hospital management who closed a section for us at the women's clinic. Everyone who came in was controlled. Outside the police were patrolling, and both of us were nervous. It was a special smell in there. People were running in the halls, and you could hear yelling and voices. Have I said that I hate hospitals? I hate hospitals. I feel good when others feel good. If people are sick around me I get sick, and least it feels like that. I can't explain it. But I feel really bad being in a hospital. It's something in the air and the atmosphere, and most of the time I try to get away as soon as possible.

But now I had decided to stay and be a part of everything, and that made me tense. I get a lot of letter from all over the world and most of the time I don't open them; it's some sort of fairness thing. Because I can't read and answer them all, I often let be unopened. No one should benefit whilst others don't. But sometimes Helena can't resist and then we've heard the most horrible stories, like a child who's going to die within a month and has me as a idol, and then Helena usually asks: What can we do? Can we get them match tickets? Send signed shirts? We really try to help. But I feel bad about it. It's a weakness I have, I admit it, and now I was going to sleep at a hospital, and I was worried about it, but Helena had it worst obviously. She was really wound up. It's not easy being chased when you're having your first child. If something goes wrong, the whole world will know about it.



Was something going to go wrong? I had those thoughts. But it went good, and afterwards I felt joy, happiness. If was such a nice little boy and we had done it. We were parents. I was a dad and that something could be wrong with the boy wasn't in my head, not when we had taken ourselves through this ordeal and all the doctors and nurses seemed so happy. I wasn't even on the map, but the drama wasn't over, not at all.

We named the boy Maximilian. I don't really know where we got the name from. But it sounded powerful. Ibrahimovic was powerful itself. Maximilian Ibrahimovic was even more powerful. It was nice and powerful at the same time but we called him Maxi in the end, but that was also good. It felt overall very promising, and I got out of the hospital almost right away. Not that it was easy though. There were journalists everywhere outside. But the security guy put a doctor's coat on me, doctor Ibrahimovic you know. After that they put me in a laundry basket, sick, a big fucking basket, and I laid there crouched together like a ball and was driven through the halls down to the garage, and there I jumped out of the basket and put on my clothes and went to Italy. It fooled everyone.

Helena didn't have it as good as me. It wasn't easy for her at all. It had been a difficult childbirth, and she wasn't used to all the attention as I was. I wasn't even thinking about it anymore. It was just a part of my life. But Helena got more and more stressed, and she and Maxi were smuggled out to my mom's house in Svågerstorp in different cars. We believed she could take a breather there. But we were naive. It just took an hour. Then all the journalists were outside, and Helena felt hunted and closed in so she flew to Milano.

I was already there and was going to play a game against Chievo at San Siro. I was benched. I hadn't slept much. Roberto Mancini, our coach, didn't think I could focus properly and it was probably wise. My thoughts were fluttering and I looked at the pitch and up towards the crowd. Ultras, Inter's hardcore supporters, had hanged a very big banner in the stands. It looked like pirate sail that was floating in the wind, and on the banner it was written, or sprayed, with black and blue. It said "Benvenuto Maximilian", Welcome Maximilian, and I wondered: "Who the hell is Maximilian? Do we have a player with that name?"

Then I got it. It was my son. The Ultras had welcomed my boy to this earth! It was so beautiful that I wanted to cry. Those fans can't be messed with. They're tough guys, and I was going to have some hard fights with them. But now... what should I say? It was Italy at its best. It was the love to football and love to the children, and I took my telephone and took a picture and sent it to Helena, and honestly, few things have gone right to her heart like that. She still gets tears in her eyes when she's talking about it. It was like San Siro was sending its love.

I had gotten a puppy as well. We called him Trustor after that tangle where they had stolen money from a company. So now I really had a family. I had Helena, Maxi and Trustor. At this time I played my Xbox all the time. I really went over the limit. It became like a poison. I couldn't stop, and often I sat with little Maxi in my lap and played. We lived on a hotel in Milano because we were waiting for an apartment, and when we called the reception and ordered food we really felt: they're tired of us and we're tired of them. The hotel got on our nerves and we changed to hotel Nhow at Via Tortona, and it got better, but still chaotic.

Everything was new with Maxi and we noticed of course, he was throwing up a lot and didn't gain weight, more of the opposite. He got thinner. But none of us knew how it should be. Maybe it was normal. Someone had said that infants can lose weight sometime after birth, and he really felt strong, didn't he? But the food came up, and his vomit felt thick and looked weird. He was throwing up all the time. Should it be like that? We had no clue, and I called my family and my friends, and everyone comforted; it's probably nothing, and I didn't think it was either, or at least, I didn't want to think it was, and I tried to find explanations.

It's cool. He's my kid. What can go wrong? But we couldn't stop worrying, and became more obvious that he could keep the food down, and he lost even more weight. He was three kilo when he was born. Now he was down on two thousand eight hundred grams, and I felt it in my stomach, this is not good, not at all, and I couldn't keep it in my anymore.

"Something's not right, Helena!"

"I think so too", she answered, and how can I explain?

What had been a suspicion before, a hunch, had become a total conviction now. My whole body closed down. I had never felt anything like it before, not even close. Before I had kids I was Mr. Untouchable. I could get mad and furious, get all kinds of emotions. But everything would be alright if I just kept fighting. Now there was no such thing. I was powerless. I couldn't train him to become healthy. I couldn't do anything.

Maxi got weaker and weaker, and he was so little, it really showed now, he was only skin and bones. It was like life was leaving him and we called around in panic, and a doctor, a woman, came up to our hotel room. I wasn't at home then. I was going to play a game. But I think we were lucky.

The doctor smelled to vomit. She looked at it and recognized the symptoms and said right away: You must go to the hospital at once, and I remember it very well. I was with the team. We were facing Messina at home, and the phone rang. Helena was hysteric: "Maxi's going to be operated", he said, "it's urgent", and I thought: Are we going to lose him? Is it really possible? It just started buzzing in me, all kinds of questions and paranoiacs, and I told Mancini. Like many others he was a old player, and he had started his coaching career under Sven-Göran Eriksson in Lazio. He got it, he had heart.

"My kid is sick", I said and he looked into my eyes, I felt shit.

I had no longer only winning in my head. I had Maxi there, nothing else, my little boy, my beloved son, and he let me decide myself: would I play or not? I had scored six goals that season so far, and had been really good in a lot of games. But now... what to do? Nothing with Maxi would become better if I sat on the bench, it was true. But would I be able to perform? I didn't know. My brain was boiling.

From Helena I got reports now and then. She had gone to the hospital and apparently everyone was screaming around her and no one could speak English, and Helena couldn't speak a word Italian. She was totally lost. He didn't understand anything, only that it was urgent, and a doctor told her to sign a paper. What kind of paper? She had no clue. But she didn't have time to think. She signed it. I guess in situations like this you'll sign anything. New papers came. She signed them as well and they took Maxi from her, and it hurt, I really understand that.

Like, what's happening? What's going on? She was all torn up, and Maxi got even weaker. But Helena kept it together. She couldn't do anything else. She had to accept the situation and hope whilst Maxi was taken to another room with doctors and nurses and the whole thing, and just slowly she understood what was wrong. His stomach wasn't working like it should and they had to operate on him.

I was in San Siro with that crazy crowd and it wasn't easy to focus. But I had decided to play. I was also starting. I think I was. Everything is foggy, and I guess that I didn't play any good. How could I, and I remember that Mancini stood by the sideline and gave me a sign: I'll take you out in five, and I nodded. Absolutely, I'll leave the pitch. I'm not doing any good here.

But a minute later I scored, and I thought: Mancini, go to hell! Try to take me out now! I played, and we won big. I played on anger and anxiety, and afterwards I just ran out. I didn't say a word in the locker room and I can hardly remember the trip. My heart was pounding.

But I remember the hospital halls and the smell and how I was rushing forward and was asking, where, where, and how I eventually wandered to a big room where Maxi was in an incubator with other children. He was smaller than ever, like a little bird. He had tubes in his body and in the nose. My heart was ripped out of me, and I looked at him and Helena, and what do you think? Was I the tough guy from Rosengård?

"I love you guys", I said. "You're everything to me. But I can't take it. I'm going to flip out. Call me if there's anything, anything!", and then I got out of there.

It wasn't kind towards Helena. He was alone with him. But I couldn't take it. I panicked. I hated hospitals more than ever, and I went to the hotel and probably played the Xbox. It usually calms me down in situations like this, and all night I laid there my phone close to me, and sometimes I twitched, like I was expecting something horrible. But it went well. The operation was a success and Maxi is fine nowadays. He has a scar on his stomach. But other than that he's as healthy as everyone else, and I think about that thing sometimes. It gives me perspective, honestly.

We really won the Scudetto that first year with Inter and later in Sweden I was nominated for the Jerring-price. There's no jury picking the winner. The Swedish people do. The Sweds vote which athlete has been the best one that year, and of course, that kind of prizes almost always are given to athletes in individual sports, Ingemar Stenmark, Stefan Holm, Annika Sörenstam and people like that, or, a couple of times had teams won it as well. The Swedish NT won it in 1994. But then in 2007 I was nominated to win it alone. It was at the Sports gala. Me and Helena were there together, I had a tuxedo and before the award ceremony I was mingling and met Martin Dahlin.

Martin Dahlin is a former great player. He was in the NT that took a WC-bronze and got the Jerring-prize in 1994, and he had been a pro in Roma and Borussia Mönchengladbach and scored a lot of goals. But like always, it's one generation against the other. The elders want to be the best ever. The young ones want to as well. We don't want to get the old stars banged in our heads, and we really don't want to hear: You should have been there in our time, and shit like that. We want football to be best now, and I remember that gibe in Martin's voice:

"Oh, are you here?"

"Why shouldn't I be here?"

"And you to?" I said with the same gibe, or like I was really surprised that he of all people had been let in.

"We won the prize in 1994"

"Like a team, yes. I'm nominated individually", I answered and smiled, it was nothing, just a little cock fight.

But in that moment I felt it in my whole body, I wanted that prize, and I told it to Helena when I got back to my table. "Please, I hope I win!" I had never said anything like that, not even about the cups of leagues. I had been given a lot of prizes, but had never been touched like that, and maybe, I don't know, I understood that it could be a confirmation, a sign that I had been accepted for real, not only as a football player, but also as a person, despite all my outrages and my background. That's why I was all tense whilst they were doing their thing up there on the scene and counting candidates.

It was me, that girl Kallur, and the skier Pärson. I had no clue how it would go. I get information before the Golden Balls. But now I didn't know a thing, and the seconds went on. Damn it, just say it. The winner is...

They said my name, and then my tears just wanted to come, and believe me, I don't cry so easily. I was never trained in that type of stuff when I grew up, but now I was all emotional, and I stood up. Everyone was screaming and applauding. On my way to the scene I passed Martin Dahlin again and I just couldn't resist telling him:

"Excuse me Martin, I'm just going up there too to get a prize."

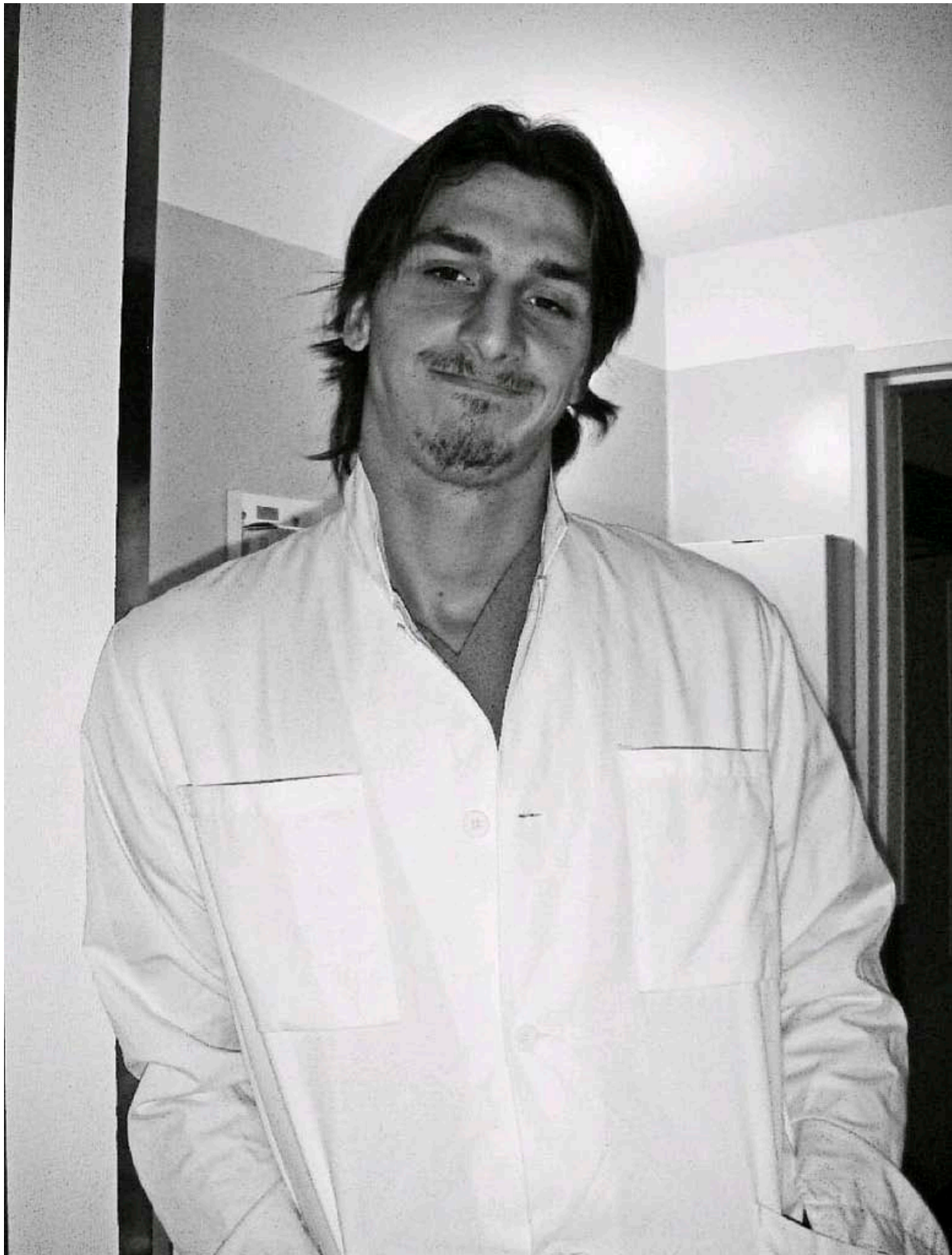
Up there on the scene I got the prize from prince Carl Philip and took the microphone, and I'm not the type who prepares thank you speeches, not at all. I just talk on, and suddenly I started thinking about Maxi and all that we had been through with him, and then I started wondering, it's really weird. But I had been given the prize because I helped Inter to win their first Scudetto in seventeen years, and I asked myself the question if Maxi had been born during that season, not this year but the season we had won. It was like I suddenly didn't know, and I asked Helena:

"Was it that season Maxi was born?" and I looked at her, she could barely nod an answer.

She was tearing eyed, and I'll never forget that, believe me.

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A proud Dr. Ibra at Maxi's birth



Parents





The Ultras welcome Maxi to life



## CHAPTER 17

Maybe I was getting older and more mature, or maybe not. I've talked about kicks. I need kicks. I've needed them ever since I was little, and sometimes I totally lose it. It still happens. I have a friend who's been around for a long time and who owned a pizza joint in Malmö. He weighs like a hundred twenty kilos, and I drove from Båstad to Malmö with him in my Porsche, and honestly, many people don't like driving with me. Not that I'm a bad driver, not at all. I rule. But I have a lot of adrenaline, and this time we sped up to 300 km/hr. It felt slow so I pushed it further. Three hundred and one, three hundred and two, and after a while the road became more narrow. But I continued, and when the meter said three twenty five my friend lost it:

"Zlatan, slow the fuck down, I have a family!"

"And what about me, you fat bastard, what do I have", I replied.

Then I slowed down, probably reluctantly, and we had a sigh of relief and smiled at each other. You have to take care of yourself, after all. But it wasn't easy getting sensible. Those things gave me kicks, and even though I've never done any drugs, there's probably an addict inside me. I get lost in things. Now it's hunting. But back then it was Xbox and a new game came in November that year.

It was called "Gears of War", and I went insane. I'd lock myself up. I built a gaming room and sat there hour after hour and it could be three, four in the morning, and I really had to take care of myself and not turn up at practice like a wreck. But I continued. "Gears of War" was like a poison. "Gears of War" and "Call of Duty". I played those all the time.

I needed more and more. I couldn't stop and often I would play online with others, Englishmen, Italians, Swedes, lots of different people, six, seven hours a day, and I had a gamer tag. I couldn't call myself Zlatan on the net. So of course, no one knew who was behind my tag.

But I promise you, I impressed people, even under a false name. I had been gaming all my life, and I'm an extreme competitor. I'm focused. I crushed everyone. But sure, there was this other guy; he was also good and online all the time, all through the nights, just like me. His gamer tag was D - something and I heard him talk sometimes. We all had headsets and were talking during and between games.

I tried to be quiet. I wanted to be anonymous. It wasn't always easy. I was full of adrenaline and one of those days people were talking about their cars. D had a Porsche 911 Turbo, he said, and then I couldn't hold back anymore. I had given one of those to Mino after that lunch at Okura in Amsterdam. So I started talking, and I noticed it immediately. People were suspicious. Someone said "you sound like Zlatan." No, no, that's not me. Come on, they went on asking different questions. But I got my way out of it and we started talking Ferraris instead, but that wasn't much better to tell you the truth.

"I have one", I said. "Quite a special one, actually."

"What model?"

"You won't believe me if I tell you", I answered, and of course D got curious.

"Come on! Which one is it?"

"It's an Enzo."

He was quiet.

"It doesn't exist."

"Sure it does!"

"An Enzo?"

"An Enzo!"

"Well, then you can only be one person."

"Who?", I tried.

"The one we talked about."

"Maybe", I said. "Maybe not." And we continued playing, and when we didn't play we kept talking, and I questioned the guy a bit and found out that he was a stock broker.

It was easy talking to him. We liked the same things. But he didn't ask me any more about who I was. We talked about other things, and sure, I noticed that he liked football and fast cars. But he wasn't a tough guy, more a sensitive, thinking guy, and one day we were talking about watches and watches is something else I've become interested in. D wanted a very special and expensive watch, and someone else there said "there is a huge waiting list for that one", and maybe there is, but not for me. As a football player in Italy you have things set up for you. You can get past any lines and get discounts on everything, so I joined the chat again:

"I can get one of those for you in a week for so and so much."

"Are you kidding?"

"Of course not!"

"How would we do it?"

"I just call a guy", I said and thought, what do I have to lose?

If D didn't want the watch or was full of shit, I could keep it myself. It wasn't a big deal, and the guy felt reliable, and sure, he was talking about Ferraris and expensive things. But he wasn't the bragging kind. He seemed to like those things, and I said:

"Hey, I'm going to Stockholm soon and will stay at the Scandic Hotel."

"Okay", he said.

"If you are sitting there in the lobby at four o'clock, you will get your watch."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm a serious guy."

After that I called my contact and received that special watch, a very nice little thing, and I sent my bank details to D through my Xbox-account. Not much later I flew to Stockholm. We were playing a Euro qualifier, and as always we stayed at the Scandic Park Hotel. Me and Lagerbäck had reconciled after everything, and I checked into the hotel and said hello to all the guys. In my luggage I had the watch in a little box and like we had agreed, in the afternoon I went down to the lobby. I felt calm. But to be sure I brought the national team's head of security, Janne Hammarbäck.

I had no idea of how D looked or who he was. No matter how nice he had sounded he could be anyone, a maniac with ten crazy friends, not that I thought so, but still. You never know, and I looked to the left and

to the right down there, and the only one I saw was a thin dark guy who sat on a chair and seemed very shy.

"Are you here to get a watch?" I said.

"Yes, I..."

He stood up, and I saw it directly. He became nervous. I think he had already before figured out who I was, but still, then and there it really got to him, like "it's yooou." I had seen it before of course. People get nervous around me, and in situations like that I become more open and friendly and I asked a lot of questions about his work, where he used to hang out and stuff like that. After a while he relaxed too, and then we started talking Xbox. What can I say? It was very nice. It was something new.

My friends from Rosengård are guys from the street: they have a lot of attitude and adrenaline and there's nothing wrong with that, not at all, I grew up with that. But still, this guy, he was intelligent and careful, he was thinking differently, he wasn't macho, not at all, he didn't need to act up, and normally I don't let people in close to me that easily. I've made some mistakes, and often people just want to use me for their own good: I know Zlatan. I'm the coolest.

But I felt it immediately, me and this guy clicked, and I told him: "I'll put the clock at the hotel reception, and as soon as I have the money on my account you can pick it up."

After half an hour he had transferred the money, and we stayed in touch. We texted. We talked on the phone, and he came and visited us in Milan. He was a well behaved Swedish guy who says "It's nice seeing you" and stuff like that. He didn't fit in with my Rosengård friends. But he fitted well in with Helena. He was like her type; finally a guy who doesn't blow off bombs everywhere! He became a new person in my life, and Helena calls him my internet date.

Do you remember "Milen" in Malmö FF, the running race I skipped by taking the bus or steal a bike? That wasn't too long ago, and I was thinking about that sometimes, not only because I had been picked for the first team back then. There was so much that was different. Like those buildings on Limhamnsvägen. How insanely unreachable didn't those feel, especially that pink house which was big as a castle? Back then I just couldn't understand: What kind of people lives like that? They must have amazing lives.

I was still thinking about that, in a way. I didn't feel insecure in front of those people anymore, on the contrary, but I remember the pain: the pain of being far outside that world, and knowing you're not living under the same conditions. You don't forget those kinds of feelings, and I was still dreaming about revenge - about showing them that I wasn't the guy from Rosengård with the Fido Dido anymore. I was too someone who could sit in a fat ass house, and me and Helena really needed a home in Malmö.

We couldn't live with mom in Svågertorp anymore. We were expecting our second child. I wanted my own fence to blow away and me and Helena drove around checking different houses out. It was a fun thing we just did. We made charts and lists, and what do you think, which house came out on top? The pink one on Limhamnsvägen of course, and not only because of my old dreams. That house was really the best. It was the nicest in Malmö, but of course, there was just one problem.

Some people were living in it, and they weren't selling, so what do you do? That was the question. We decided not to give up. Maybe even give them "an offer they couldn't refuse." Not that I would send my friends from Rosengård. It would be handled with style, but still, we decided to go ahead offensively, and one of those days Helena was out at Ikea.

At Ikea she met a friend, and they started talking about the pink house.

"But you know what, some friends of mine live there", her friend said.

"Set up a meeting. We'd like to talk to them", Helena said.

"Are you kidding?"

"Not at all", and so it happened.

The friend checked things out and called and said that the couple who lived in the house didn't want to sell, no way. The loved it there, the neighbours were nice, the grass was greenm the view towards Ribersborg and Öresund was amazing, bla bla bla. But the friend had her instructions and answered that we wouldn't listen to those things. If they wanted to stay there, no matter what we paid, they could say it



directly to us, and wouldn't it be fun having Zlatan and Helena over for coffee? Hey, doesn't happen to everyone.

They agreed, and me and Helena went there, and I felt immediately that I had the upper hand. I am me, we will work this out, but still, it was double. When I stepped through those gates I felt big and small at the same time, both as that little guy who stared at those houses during "Milen" and also as the biggest star. At first I just walked around with Helena and checked things out, "Nice, nice, you have it really nice here." I handled myself and was polite and all that. But then when we sat down for coffee I couldn't hold myself back anymore.

"We are here because you live in our house", I said, and the man laughed, like it was a joke, and sure, it was a bit of that. It was humor in a way. Like a line from a movie. But I continued:

"Look at it as a joke if you will. But I'm serious. I'm buying this house, I will make sure you are satisfied, but we have to have it", and then he continued, it wasn't for sale, under no conditions.

He was very determined, or more like he pretended to be, because now I heard. It was like on the transfer market. It was a game. The house had a price for him. I could sense it, and I could see it in his eyes, and I explained my philosophy: I don't want to do things I can't handle. I'm a football player. Not a negotiator. I will send a guy to deal with this.

Not Mino, if that was what you were thinking. I had limits. I sent a lawyer, and don't think I'm a fool who throws his money around just like that. I'm tactical. I'm careful about things. It wasn't: "Buy it at any price", nothing like that. It was: "Make sure to buy it, but for as little as possible." And then we sat there at home waiting. It was a bit of a drama. But then the call came. "They sell for thirty", and then there wasn't much more to discuss. We bought it for thirty [ed note: close to three million euros], and to tell you the truth, for that money I think they ran out the door.

I had done it. And sure, it wasn't for free. We had paid to get them out of the house. But still, that was just the beginning. We renovated the place like crazy. We didn't spare any expenses. We weren't allowed to heighten the wall around the property. The city said no. So what to do? We wanted a higher wall. We didn't want fans or stalkers standing outside looking at us. So we dug ourselves down. We lowered the whole thing. Many things like that. We spent a lot and it wasn't always that popular.

The houses in that area usually go in heritage, from one generation to the next. Daddy's money pay and no one from my kind of background had ever moved in there. It was upper class all around, and no one talks like me, no one says the fattest house and stuff like that. Here they say distinguished and extraordinary.

But I wanted to show that a guy like me could get here with his own money. That was important for me from the first minute, and I didn't expect any applause. But still, I was surprised. Fuck, are they doing this and that? They went on like that all the time. They whined. But we didn't care and built the house the way we wanted it.

It was Helena who did it. She was so accurate about things and took help from different museums and god knows what. I wasn't as involved as she was. I didn't have the sense that she did for those things, but I made one contribution. In the entrance, against the red wallpaper, I put up a huge photo of my two dirty feet, and when friends came by they all said cool, what an awesome house.

"But what kind of shitty disgusting feet do you have there on the wall?"

"Idiots", I said. "Those feet paid for all this."

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The new home at Limhamnsvägen in Malmö



King of the castle



The two dirty feet that paid for it all



## CHAPTER 18

I remember when I saw him at practice. It was quite nice, I have to say that; a sense of something familiar despite all the switching of clubs. But I couldn't think of anything better than yelling:

"Hey you, are you stalking me or what?"

"Of course, someone must make sure you have cornflakes in the fridge."

"But I refuse living on your mattress this time."

"If you're nice, you won't have to."

It felt good having Maxwell with me in Inter. He had come sometime before me, but had hurt his knee and had been doing rehab, so it took a while before I saw him. I don't think I know a more elegant player. He's that offensive Brazilian defender who dares playing a beautiful game deep down in defense, and often I just enjoy watching him play. But still, sometimes I'm surprised he's become so good. Nice guys like him usually don't make it in football. You need to be tough and hard, and I felt that I had become that after the years in Juventus, and more than ever in a team I had been part of winning the league the first year with Inter. Not just during the games, but all over, with my attitude.

All that nonsense with Brazilians in one corner and Argentines in the other was gone, and as every month passed my position in the club grew stronger, and of course Moratti noticed this. He was good to me and made sure the family was good, and on the pitch I continued to shine. We took the top of the league again. The dark nineties when Inter never made it were gone. What I had hoped for had worked out. The

whole team lifted themselves when I came, and of course Mino understood it, our position for negotiations was good.

It was time to re-negotiate the contract, and no one knows those things better than Mino. He did all his little tricks on Moratti. I have no idea what he said or did. I was never part of the negotiations, but there were rumors about Real Madrid wanting me so he used that and put some heavy pressure on Moratti. But seriously, not that much was needed. It was a new situation now. When I signed for Inter I was so desperate getting away from Juventus that Moratti of course could use that. In this business you always look at the weakness of your opponent. It's part of the game. You put the knife to a throat and during the negotiations he had lowered my wages four times. But that was getting back at him. Mino and I agreed on that, and Moratti wasn't as strong anymore. Considering my importance to the team, he couldn't afford losing me, and it didn't take long before he said:

"Give the guy what he wants."

I got an awesome deal. Later, when the details leaked out there was even talk about me being the highest paid player in the world. But back then no one knew. One of Moratti's demands was that everything was kept secret for six, seven months, but sooner or later it would leak and make a bang, we knew that, and honestly, the big thing wouldn't be the salary itself, but the hype it created.

If you're viewed as the best paid player in the world, people look on you differently. Another spotlight is turned on. The fans, the players, the sponsors all look at you with new eyes, and what is that you say? He who has, gets more. When you've reached the top you continue upwards. It's pure psychology. Everyone is interested in the one who's number one. That's how the market works even though I think no one deserves that kind of money, I knew my value on the market, and I had it in my blood: never get fucked like in the Ajax-deal. But it's true, with a high salary come a lot of other stuff, more pressure for example. You have to deliver and continue shining.

But I liked it too. I wanted pressure. It made me tick, and after half the season I had scored ten goals and there was hysteria everywhere. It was "Ibra, Ibra" and in February we seemed to have secured the league again. Nothing seemed to stop us. But I had gotten some discomfort in my knee. I tried ignoring it, like: No, that's nothing. But it returned, and got worse every time. We had won our group in Champions League, and things were looking good there too.

But in the round of last 16 we met Liverpool and in the first game at Anfield I really felt the injury limit me. We had a terrible game and lost 2-0. I was in a lot of pain afterwards, and now I couldn't delay it anymore. I had an examination and the results came quickly. I had an inflammation to the patellar tendon.

The patellar tendon is an extension of the thigh muscles, and I skipped the game against Sampdoria. I didn't think it was a big deal, not for me or the team. Sampdoria wasn't Liverpool. The guys should be able to handle it without me. We had an incredible run in the league. We had even broken the record of most straight wins in the Serie A. But that didn't help.

The play didn't work against Sampdoria. It was one of the first signs of things going wrong, and we seemed to lose. Hernan Crespo saved us in the last minutes with a header. We got 1-1, barely, and like that it continued. After I had become injured our game went bad, either that was the reason or not, but our good game turned worse. We played 1-1 against Roma and lost against Napoli, and I heard Mancini and the other guys; they were worried. I had to play again. We couldn't lose our advantage in the league, and I was sent away for treatment. My recovery had to happen fast, and shortly thereafter, on the 8th of March, I was fielded against Reggina.

Reggina were second to last in the league, and you can really question if it was necessary to have me on the field. I had pains. I was playing on painkillers, some heavy shit, and Reggina shouldn't be a problem. But the nervousness had spread in the team. The confidence had disappeared while I was gone, and week by week Roma and Milan had gotten closer in the league table, so I guess Mancini didn't want to take any chances. From having been a winning machine, we now didn't even feel confident against the bottom teams of the league, and I couldn't say no. Especially not since the doctor said ok, although under pressure. In some ways that knee didn't belong to me.



The management was the boss of my knee in some ways. A football player at my level is a little bit like an orange. The club will squeeze it until there's no more juice, and it's time to sell the guy. It sounds a bit harsh, but that's the reality. It's a part of the game. We're owned by the club and we're there to win titles, not improving our health, and sometimes not even the team doctors know which foot to lean on. Should they see the players as patients or products belonging to the club? They're not working at a hospital; after all, they're part of the team. And then there's you. You can question it. You can even scream: This won't work; I'm in too much pain. No one knows your body better than yourself.

But the pressure is hard and often you just want to play without considering the consequences. It's a risky game. Maybe I can do some good today, but damage myself for me and the club in the longer run. You have those problems all the time. What to do? Who should you listen to? Doctors who after all are more careful or the coach who only wants to see you on the pitch and only is thinking about the next game. Like: fuck tomorrow, let's win today.

I played against Reggina and Mancini was right - at least for the short run. I scored my 15th goal in that game and lead us to victory, and of course that was a relief. But it also meant the club wanted me to play the next game, and I agreed. What else could I do? I got more painkiller shots and more Voltaren, and all the time I kept hearing or feeling: We have to have Ibra with us. We can't afford letting him rest, and I really don't blame anyone. Like I said, I wasn't a patient at a hospital. I was the one who had been leading us since I joined the club, and it was decided that I also would play our return game against Liverpool in the Champions League, and that was really important both to me and the team.

Champions League had become sort of a hang up for me. I wanted to win that damn thing. But since we had lost the first game we were forced to win the second one huge to advance, and of course, we tried everything. We worked hard. But our game didn't work no either, and I wasn't great, not at all. I missed some chances and in the 50th minute Burdisso got the red card.

It sucked. And we had to fight even harder. It didn't help and I felt more and more: This doesn't work. I have too much pain. I'm destroying myself, and eventually I left the pitch with pains in my knee and I won't ever forget that.

Their fans were booing and whistling at me, and I'm sure you understand, as injured you keep asking yourself: Should I play or not, and how much are you willing to sacrifice for this game? Not that you know it, it's like roulette, you make a bet and hope not to lose it all: an entire season, or anything. But I had stayed long on the pitch because the coach wanted me to and because I thought I could mean something to the team. But the only thing that happened is that the injury got worse and we lost 1-0. I had put my health on the line and we hadn't won shit, and the English fans there were yelling at me. Me and the English fans and media have never really made a match, and now I was called "a whing primadonna" and "the most overrated player in Europe", and normally those things just trigger me. Like when the parents signed their lists to get rid of me. I fight even harder and show those bastards. But now I didn't have a body to respond with. I had pains and the atmosphere in the team was awful. Everything was like switched. All the good harmony and optimism was like gone. The media said something is wrong with Inter, and Roberto Mancini declared that he would leave the club. He would get away, he said. But then he took it back. All of a sudden he wasn't going anywhere, and the trust in him disappeared. What did he want? As a coach you can't do it like that: I won't stay. I will stay. It isn't professional, and we continued losing points.

We had had a big advantage in the league, but it decreased all the time. We only got 1-1 against Genoa and lost at home against Juventus. I was on the pitch then as well. I, the stupid idiot, didn't know how to say no. But afterwards I could barely walk, and I remember coming into the locker room, I wanted to tear that place down and I was screaming at Mancini, I was completely wild. This is fucking it! I have to get some rest and some rehab. I couldn't play everything no matter what the situation in the league was. I had no choice. I had to step off. But believe me, it wasn't easy. It was shit.

You're sitting there. The other ones go to practice. You go to the gym and through the window you can see the other ones through the window. It's like watching a film you should be starring in, but aren't

allowed. It hurts. That feeling is almost worse than the injury itself, so I decided to fly away from the circus in the club. I went home to Sweden. It was spring. It was beautiful, but I didn't enjoy it, not at all.

I only had one thing on my mind, and that was getting well, and I had myself examined by our national team doctor, and I remember him getting upset. How could I have been allowed playing for so long on painkillers? It was only two months left until the Euros in Switzerland and Austria, and now that seemed to be at stake for me too.

I had pressured myself too hard, and it was just shit, and I had to do everything to get well again. I called Rickard Dahan. Dahan was a physician at MFF, and we knew each other since my time there. We started working together, and then I got a tip about a doctor.

He was in Umeå, northern Sweden, and I flew there and got some shots that killed all the cells in the patellar tendon, and I got better. But far from perfect, and I still couldn't play. It felt hopeless, and I was pissed off and angry and surely no fun to be around, and in the league the bad stretch went on. The guys could secure the scudetto against Siena, just win it, and Patrick Viera shot 1-0 and the fans started dancing and singing. It looked like it would work out, and Balotelli, the young talent who had stepped in for me, scored another goal. It simply couldn't fail, not against a team like Siena.

But Siena equalized, it was 2-2, the density was incredible, and only ten minutes left of the game. Then Materazzi was fouled and we got a penalty, and people were trembling. This had to be a goal. Everything seemed at stake, and during this time Julio Cruz, the Argentinian, was first penalty shooter. But Materazzi, that guy had authority and temper, everyone knows that, and he said, like: I don't give a shit. I'll take this penalty, and I guess many felt ok with that after all. Materazzi was 34. He had experience; he had been part of winning a World Cup final. But he shot a terrible penalty kick. The goalie took it and the supporters screamed out of pain and anger, I'm sure you understand. It was the sense of complete disaster, and sure, if anyone should be able to handle that it would be Materazzi. He's like me. He's triggered by hate and revenge. But it couldn't have been easy for him.

The Ultras were raging and very aggressive, and the papers went mad, and no one in club was well, not at all. When we had missed our opportunity, Roma had beaten Atalanta and gained on us. Roma seemed to have the initiative and there was only one round left of the league, and that made us worry, of course!

We had had the scudetto in our hands. Most people had said the league was done. But then I had become injured and our nine point lead had narrowed down to one and it wasn't surprising that most people said the odds were against us, and probably the gods as well. There were many questions flying around. It didn't feel good. What had happened to Inter? Why doesn't anything work anymore? There was talk like that everywhere.

The fact was that if we lost or drew against Parma and Roma won against bottom of the league-team Catania, which Roma definitely should do, we would fall and lose everything that we thought we had already won. I was back in Milan then, but I still wasn't well. But that didn't matter and I heard it more and more, louder than ever: Ibra has to play; we've got to have him with us. The pressure on me turned into the insane. I had never experienced anything like it. I had been away on rehab training for six weeks. and I was in bad shape. The last time I had played a game was on the 29th of March. Now we were in the middle of May, and everyone knew my shape couldn't be too good.

But no one cared about any of that, and I don't blame anyone, not at all. I was considered the most important player of Inter, and in Italy football is more important than life itself, especially in situations like that one. It had been years since that kind of tension had reached into the last round of the league, and it was Milan against Rome, the two big cities against each other, and people didn't talk about anything else. If you turned on the TV there were sports broadcasts all the time, and my name was mentioned every other minute. Ibra, Ibra. Is there a chance that he plays? Can he make it? Is he good, despite the break? No one knew. Everyone was talking about it and the fans were screaming: Ibra, help us!

It wasn't easy thinking about my well-being and the Euros that waited for me. The game against Parma was buzzing in my head all the time, and if I went out, I'd see myself on all the front pages, with headlines

like "Stand up for the team and for the city", and I remember Mancini. He came up to me. It was just a few days before the team would leave. Roberto Mancini is a bit of a fancy boy. He likes shiny suits, handkerchiefs and that kind of stuff, and I had never had anything against him, not at all. But his position in the club had become much worse since he had been whining about his job back and forth. I mean, either you leave or you don't. You don't say: I want to leave, I'll stay. It bothered a lot of people. The club needed stability, and no questions about where the coach had his focus. But now Mancini was fighting to get his status back. He had to. The most important day in his life as a coach was getting closer and nothing could go wrong, so it wasn't too surprising that he looked "demanding".

"Yes", I said.

"I know your injury isn't completely healed."

"No."

"But I don't really give a shit", he said.

"That's probably smart, I guess."

"Good! I'm gonna take you in the squad against Parma, no matter what you say. Either you play from the start, or you start on the bench. But I have to have you with me. We have to win this now."

"I know. I want to play."

I wanted that more than anything else. I didn't want to be away when the scudetto was secured. That would be one of those things you can't live with. I'd rather have pain for a few weeks or months than miss a fight like this. But it was true; I didn't know anything about my form. I didn't know how my knee would react in a match situation or if I would dare going 100% and maybe Mancini could sense my hesitation, and he didn't want his message to be misunderstood.

He sent Mihajlović on me as well. You remember him. He and I had that hate game back when I was in Juventus. I had head butted him, or marked a head butt, and he had been screaming all kinds of crap at me. But all that was history. What happens on the pitch stays on the pitch, and often I've become friends with guys I've been fighting with, maybe because we're alike, I don't know. But I feel comfortable with warriors and Mihajlović is a fighter. He had always done everything to win. Now he had quit as a player and was the second coach under Mancini, and honestly, few guys have thought me so much about shooting a free kick like him. He was a master at it. He had scored close to thirty goals on free kicks in Serie A. He was a good guy. He was big and straight to the point.

"Ibra", he said.

"I know what you want", I replied.

"Okey, but you have to know one thing. You don't have to train or work out. You don't have to do shit. But you are playing against Parma and you will help us win the scudetto."

"I will try", I said.

"You're not trying to do it, you're doing it", he said, and then we left with the bus.

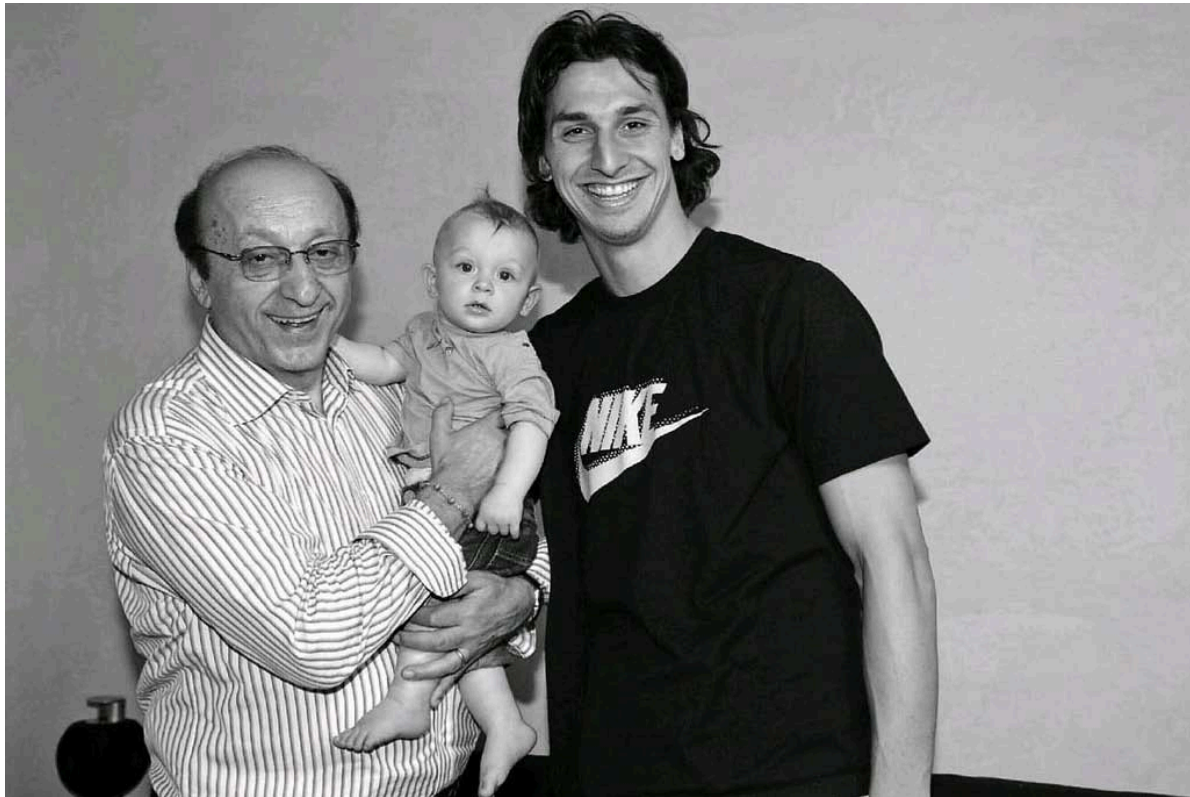
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Rickard Dahan



Moggi and Maxi



## CHAPTER 19

Sometimes some stuff is in the walls. There are some poison memories in some clubs, like the whole nineties of Inter. Despite having Ronaldo in the team back then they didn't manage to win the title once. The club lost it on the goal line every time. Like season 1997-98 for example.

I was sixteen, seventeen and didn't know a thing about Ravelli and the gang, and much about Sweden in general. But I knew Inter. I knew Ronaldo. I studied his tricks and his acceleration. There were a lot of us who did that, like I've said before. But no one took it as far as I did. I didn't miss a detail. Without him I would have been another type of player, I believe that, and I'm not the kind of guy who easily gets impressed. I've met all kind of types. I sat with the Swedish king at a dinner in Barcelona, and alright, maybe I thought: Am I holding the fork the wrong way or am I saying you when it should be your highness? But still, it was cool. I'm me. I just do my thing. But with Ronaldo it was different. When I was in Inter he played in Milan, and there's a film on YouTube where I'm chewing a gum and just watch and watch him, like I can't understand that I'm on the same pitch as him.

He had such weight. Such a look for the game. Quality in every movement and that season in 1997-98 him and Inter were unbelievable. They won the UEFA-cup and Ronaldo scored twenty five goals and was chosen as the best player in the world for the second time in a row. They dominated Serie A. But they still lost it in the spring, just like we now before the fight against Parma.

Inter had bad luck and trouble and shit and a classic game was played at Stadio delle Alpi in Turin against Juventus in the spring of 1998. Just a point, or two, split the team. It was a complete final in the league and an unbelievable suspense in the air, and Ronald was dribbling in the left of the penalty area. But he was brutally blocked and the whole arena screamed. People went mad. The stadium was boiling. But the referee never whistled. He let the game continue and Juventus won the game by one-zero and later on the whole league, and it was in that moment it all was decided. That's how people look at it. It was Inter's evil second. There were still talks about it. It was seen as an obvious penalty. But nothing happened, and there was fury and protests all over Italy and talks about the referee being bribed, or that maybe all the referees were bribed and corrupt and generally stupid, and all the elders of the club had clear memories that all that, especially since stuff like that happened several times at that time for the club. The season before that they also had the Scudetto in one hand just to lose it in the end in a game against Lazio and the next year Ronaldo was injured. Then everything went to hell, just like if the team had lost its drive and will and Inter ended up as number eight in the league, a record low, I think (ed note: think again, bitch, they were once relegated).

No one said it out loud. No one wanted to jinx anything. But a lot of people thought about it before the game against Parma. There were bad feelings. People remembered and were paranoid, and then there was that penalty Materazzi had missed. The guys had several chances to decide the league, but failed every time. It was small things every time, bad luck, mistakes. It was all kinds of shit, and absolutely, everyone was triggered against Parma, ready to do everything. But that itself could also be a problem. People whispered about it. There was a risk that the pressure could be too much. There could be gridlocks, and management forbid us to talk to the press. We were supposed to have full concentration and Mancini who always had press conferences before the games was also quiet, and the only one who said something was Moratti.

He showed up at our hotel the night before the game and didn't say anything other than "wish us good luck. It's needed", to the journalists, and nothing got easier when Parma had to win against us to secure a spot in next year's Serie A. The opposing team had the same deadly seriousness as us. We weren't getting anything for free and just before we went to the arena we got the news that our fans weren't allowed to come and support us.

It was a fairness thing. The Roma supporters weren't allowed because of security reasons to go to the away game against Catania and that's why weren't allowed to bring our fans either. But a lot of people still managed to get in. It was this and that. Every little thing was monitored and discussed and I remember Mancini. He really got mad when he heard that Gianluca Rocchi was going to be the referee. "That bastard is always against us", he sputtered and dark clouds were gathering in the sky.

It looked like it was going to rain and I was starting on the bench. I hadn't played in a long time, and Mancini started with Balotelli and Cruz up top. "But be ready", he told me, "be ready to jump in", and I nodded. All of us sat under a little roof and heard the first rain droops falling. Soon it rattled over us and the game started, and the crowd was booing. It was a terrible pressure, and we were dominating. We were pushing and Cruz and Maicon had unbelievable chances, but no, it didn't work. It looked hopeless and we were following it all from the bench of course, all tense. We were and swearing and hoping, but we looked at the big board all the time as well.

It wasn't only about our game. It was about Roma's as well and by this time it was still zero-zero there as well, and that was cool. We were still leading the league. The Scudetto was ours. But then the board blinked. The whole team jumped. No goals for Roma for god's sake? It would be too cruel. You can't be in the lead all year and lose it in the last second. That should be forbidden. But yes, Roma had made one-zero against Catania and suddenly we were number two in the league. It couldn't be happening and I saw everyone on the bench, everyone, all those who were there in the nineties, they remembered. They got pale: Is it happening again? Is the old curse back?

I've never seen anything like it. They lost the entire color in their faces, and we also felt it on the pitch. We're talking about real fear, nothing else. This was not allowed to happen. It was horrible, it was a catastrophe, and the rain just kept pouring. It was really pouring and the home crowd shouted out of joy. The result was to their advantage because if also Catania lost, Parma would secure the spot definitely. But for us it felt like death, and the players just got tenser. I saw it in them. They had been carrying crosses on their backs, and I can't say that I was really happy myself, of course not, but still, I already had three scudetto's and didn't really feel the old curse. I was too young for it and for every minute that went on I got more and more focused and triggered. It was like my body was burning.

I was going in and turn this no matter how much pain I was in. I refused to accept anything else, and in the second half when it was still zero-zero and the Scudetto was Roma's I got orders to warm up, and I remember it very well: everyone was looking at me, Mancini, Mihajlovic, everyone, doctors, everyone, and I saw it in them. They put their hopes on me. You could see it in their eyes. They starred pleadingly at me, and of course, it was impossible to not feel the pressure.

"Make this happen for us", they said one after one.

"I will, I will!"

But I didn't come in right away in the second half. I came in six minutes in. The grass was wet. It was heavy to run on and I wasn't in full fitness, and the pressure was incredibly big. But still, I had never been so triggered in my life, and I remember that I almost right away tried a shot in the middle, just outside the box.

It didn't work. A couple of minutes later I tried again. I missed then as well. It felt like I got the chance from the same position over and over again without getting anything out of it, and in the sixty second minute it happened again. I got the ball in the same position. It was Dejan Stankovic who gave the pass, and I made a guy who threw himself at me and ran towards the goal and every time I touched the ball a little water came up the ground and then I saw a good position and took a shot, not a great shot, not at all.

The shot was on the ground and went towards the left post and into the goal, and instead of making some flashy celebration after the goal I stood there and waited, and from the bench and from the pitch they came one after one, everyone, all of them who had looked at me so pleadingly, and I looked at them. The horror was gone, and Dejan Stankovic threw himself at me in the wet grass. It looked like he was praying and thanking the gods. It was hysteria and high up there in the stands Massimo Moratti was cheering, he was almost dancing on his honorary seat, and you could feel it everywhere, in everyone at the club, everyone.

A stone had fallen from their hearts. People got the colors in their faces back. It was much more than a goal. It was like I had saved them from drowning, and I looked at the crowd. Behind the booing the cheers came out from our supporters, and I made a gesture with my hand to my ear: Like, what am I hearing, and then the arena got even crazier and when all the drama had settled the game continued.

After all, nothing was secured yet. Just a goal from Parma and we were back at square one, and the nerves came back, not the old fear, not at all. But no one dared to breathe out. Worse things than a goal had happened in football. But then in the seventy eight minute Maicon dribbled at the right flank, past one, two, three guys and hit a cross and I rushed forward. I came at the same time as the defender, but got a foot on the ball and shot a half volley in goal and can you imagine. I had been gone for two months and the journalists had been writing shit about me and the team.

There had been talks about Inter losing the winning mentality and everything were slipping out of our hands and that I wasn't a real champion, not like Totti and Del Piero, or even that I wasn't good when it really mattered. But I had showed them now, and I sank down on my knees in the wet grass and just waited to be jumped on by everyone again, and I felt it in my body: this was big, and not much later the game was over and the Scudetto was ours.

Inter had not won the league in seventeen years. They had a long, heavy period, full of suffering and shit. But then I had come, and now we had won the league two years in a row, it was full circus everywhere. People ran into the pitch, and inside the locker room everyone was jumping and shouting. But then people got quiet. Mancini came in and he hadn't always been so popular, especially not when he couldn't make up his mind about his future at the club and not being able to make it in CL. But now he had won the league and the players stepped up to him, one after one, kind of solemnly like that, and took his hand and said: "Thank you very much, you did it for us." But then Mancini stepped up to me, all high after the victory and all the greetings. It was just that: he didn't get a thank you from me. I said "You're welcome", and people started laughing, like fucking Ibra, and afterwards when I talked to the journalists several of them asked:

"Who do you dedicate this victory to?"

"To you", I answered. "To media, to everyone who doubted and dissed me and Inter!"

That's how I work. I always think about the revenge. It's in me since Rosengård, it's what drives me, and I don't forget what Moratti told the media:

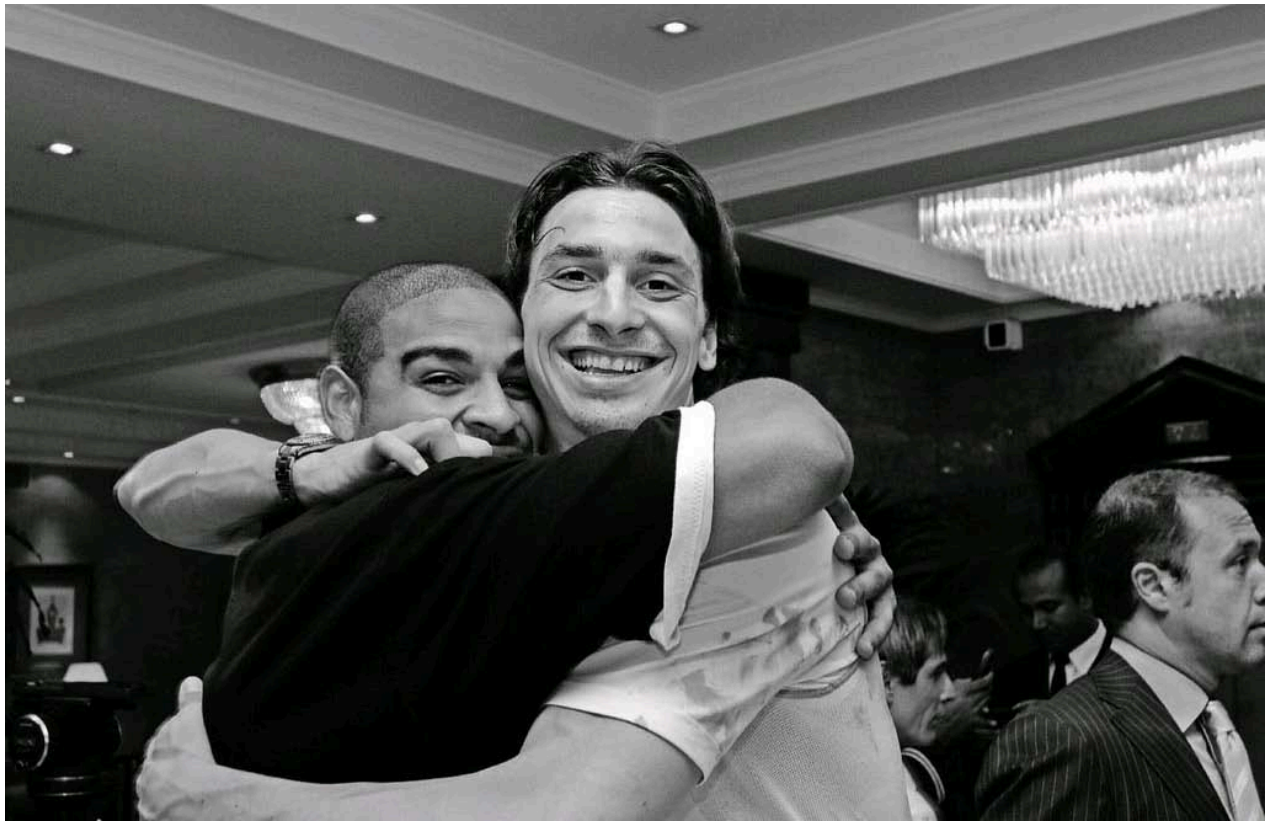
"The whole Italy was against us but Zlatan Ibrahimovic was the symbol for our struggle."

I was chosen as the best player in Serie A that year, and not later that thing about me being the world's best paid player in the world, and then everything became really sick. I could barely go out and where ever I went it was crazy. Everyone obviously thought that I had negotiated the contract after the Parma game. But the deal had been done seven, eight months earlier, and I thought: Oh My God, Moratti can't be regretting it now, and after this ending, and I felt, life has turned back again. Now the clouds have cleared. I'd had the chance to hit back. But of course, there were still things to worry about. I felt it right after the Parma game.

My knee had swollen up again. I wasn't really fully fit and I think it was a chock for most when I had to stay away from the Italian cup final and that was boring. We had the chance for the double, to take the league and the cup. But without me Roma got revenge in the final, and EC was closing in and I had no clue if my knee would be good. I had pressed myself to hard that season. I would pay the price for it.

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## CHAPTER 20

I didn't go out much anymore. I stayed at home most of the time and I had just become the dad of two. Vincent was also there. Vincent! He was so fine and his name came from the Italian word for winner, and I liked that. He had also been born during a complete chaos of course. But still, he was number two and the media took an easier route.

But seriously, two kids! It wasn't a game. I started getting how mom had it in my childhood with all the kids and her cleaning job, no parallels except that of course. We were well set, me and Helena, incredibly well set of course. But I got a sense of how difficult it must have been for mom, and after the drama with Maxi I'd become quite cautious: What kind of rash is that? Why is Vincent breathing so heavily? Why is the belly so hard? Stuff like that.

We also had a new nanny. Our old nanny had met a guy when was living with us in Malmö that summer and quit, and we were panicking a bit. We needed help and we needed a Swedish girl for the kid's sake and Helena called the job center's foreign department to talk about it. What could we do? We couldn't exactly place an ad: Zlatan and Helena are looking for a nanny. That would probably not attract the right kind of people.

Helena pretended that we were diplomats, ambassadors or something. A Swedish diplomat family seeks nanny, she wrote in an ad, and we got over three hundred replies. Helena read everything. She was very careful, as always, and I guess she thought it would be very difficult. But she stuck at one. A girl from Dalarna [ed not: northern Sweden], and only that was a point apparently. Helena wanted someone from the countryside. She herself comes from a small town, and this girl was an educated preschool teacher and knew languages and like training, just like Helena, and seemed all over nice and capable.

I didn't interfere in that. But Helena called the girl without telling her who she was. She was still the ambassador's wife, kind of, and the girl seemed interested and was easy talking to, so Helena e-mailed her:

"Come and test work for us one week!"

They decided to take Helena's rental car to Arlanda [ed note: Stockholm airport] and fly down to Milan with the boys, so the girl had to travel herself to Lindesberg where Helena was. Her dad drove her. But before they left, Helena mailed her the travel documents, and then the girl started wondering. According to the tickets, the kids of this ambassador were named Maximillian and Vincent Ibrahimovic, and that was very strange. But sure, a diplomat family could have names like that, right? Maybe there were a lot of Ibrahimovics in the country, what did she know? But she asked her dad about it.

"Please check this out, dad", she said.

"It looks like you will be the nanny for Zlatan's kids", he replied, and then she wanted to quit. Like: help! She was scared. But it sounded cool. On the other hand it was a bit too late to pull out. Tickets had been bought and everything, so they left, she and her dad, and she was very nervous, she has told. But Helena... what can I say about Helena? She is the Evilsuperbitchdeluxe when she dresses up. It takes courage to approach a woman like that. But seriously, she is so relaxed. She's an expert at making people feel comfortable and during this trip they had a lot of time getting to know each other, way too much time.

The problems began at Arlanda. They were flying Easy Jet. Only Easy Jet had flights to Milan that day. But something was wrong with the plane. The flight was delayed one hour, then two, three, six hours, eighteen hours. It was insane. It was a fucking scandal and everyone became tired and irritated, and eventually I lost it. I couldn't handle it. I called a pilot I know, he who flies the private jet I have access to.

"Pick them up", I told him, and so he did.

Helena and the girl pulled out their luggage and were taken to the private jet, and I had made sure there was catering on board, with chocolate dipped strawberries, and that whole thing, and I hoped they had a good time. They deserved it after that chaos, and finally I got to meet the girl. She was quite nervous then, from what I understand. But we got along well and since then she's been helping us and been living with us. She's part of the family now you can say, and we wouldn't make a single day without her. The

kids are crazy about her, and she and Helena are like sisters, and work out and study together. Every morning at nine o'clock they go to the gym together. Over all we got some new routines and habits.

One year we went to St Moritz. Do you think I felt at home there? Not really! I had never stood on skis before. Going to the Alps with mom and dad when I was young would have been like going to the moon. St Moritz was for the rich crowd. You had champagne for breakfast. Champagne? I was sitting in boxers and wanted cereals. Olof Mellberg was with us and he tried teaching me how to ski. I didn't work too well. I flew down the hill like crazy, when the others danced down. I looked ridiculous. So to be sure I wore a balaclava that covered my face and a pair of huge sunglasses. No one would know who I was. But one day I went up a ski lift and had a young Italian boy with his father next to me, and the kid started staring at me. Don't worry, I thought, no one recognizes me in this outfit. No chance. But after a while the guy said, it must have been my fucking nose:

"Ibra?"

I denied it. What Ibra? Who is that? But what did I gain from that? Helena started laughing. It was like the funniest shit she'd ever seen, and the kid continued with his Ibra, Ibra, so finally I said: Sì, that's me, and then the most awkward silence came. The kid was super impressed. There was only one problem. He wouldn't be impressed anymore when he saw me on skis, so I thought, how do I solve this? I'm the star athlete. I can't be revealed as a loser here. And it got even worse than I thought. People started talking. A whole crowd gathered, all standing there waiting to see me skiing. I had problems with my gloves, I was very careful with how they sat around the fingers.

I was careful about my jacket too, with my pants, the bindings, especially with those, because I've noticed that. People were messing around with their bindings all the time, opened them and closed them and so on, and who knew, maybe I was an amazing skier who had to make sure everything was perfectly set before I flew down the hills like Ingemar Stenmark. But it wasn't easy. The more I was fiddling around with my equipment, the higher everyone's expectations became. Like, is he gonna do tricks? Shoot down the mountain like a cannon ball with those football legs?

I had to adjust my scarf too. And my cap and my hair, and eventually the crowd got bored. They left. Sure, I was Ibra, but you don't stand around forever waiting just because of that, and I could calmly go down the slopes like the amateur I was, and Olof Mellberg and everyone were wondering: "Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"I just had to take care of some things."

But of course mostly it was hard work. That summer after the game against Parma and the second league victory I was going to play the Euros in Switzerland and Austria, and I was still worrying about my knee. There was a lot of media about my injury and I talked to Lagerbäck about it, and neither me nor anyone else knew if I would be able totally fit for the tournament. We had Russia, Spain and Greece in our group, and it didn't look very easy. I have a contract with Nike. Mino was against that whole deal, but I insisted, and absolutely, it's been mostly fun. We've made some fun films together, like when I'm kicking a chewing gum up into my mouth and dad is there pretending he's worried it get stuck in my throat, and especially: Nike was with me building Zlatan Court at Cronmans road in Rosengård, where I played as a kid.

It was big. The pitch was built from old rubber shoe soles. It was a great pitch and electrical lighting and stuff like that. The kids wouldn't be forced stop playing just because it got dark, and we made an inscription there: "Here is my heart. Here is my history. Here is my game. Take it further. / Zlatan." It felt fantastic being able to give something back, and when I was there for the opening you can imagine. "Zlatan, Zlatan", the kids screamed. It was chaos, and to tell you the truth I was much moved. And I played with the kids in the dark, and felt, wow, you didn't expect this from that little kid from Cronmans road.

But at the Euros I flipped at Nike. Nike had gone out hard asking everyone with a contract to play with the same color on the shoes, and I thought: Okay, let's do it, I don't care, But then I found out: another guy would be allowed to have his own color anyway. I talked to Nike about it: Why are you bullshitting like this? Everyone was supposed to have the same. We have decided it like this, they said, and I told them



what I thought about that, and then they changed their mind. Then all of a sudden everyone could have any color, me too. But then it wasn't fun anymore. You shouldn't have to argue about such things, and I kept my old shoes. It might sound childish. But people need to talk clearly.

The first game was against Greece. I had Sotirios Kyrgiakos after me. Kyrgiakos is a good defender. He had long hair and a ponytail. Every time I jumped or made a run I had his hair all over my face. And in my mouth. He marked me extremely hard. He did a good job, no questions about that. He locked me up. But he relaxed for two, three seconds, and I didn't need more than that. I received a throw-in and started dribbling and all of a sudden Kyrgiakos was far away, and I got space. I shot it straight up under the crossbar.

It was a perfect start of the Euros. We won 2-0, and my family was there, taking care of themselves this time. We had learned the lesson from the World Cup in Germany. I played football. I couldn't be a travel guide as well. Everyone minded their own, and that felt good. But my knee hurt and was swollen and we had Spain in the next game. Spain was one of the favourites to win the Euros. They had beaten Russia with 4-1 in the first game, and it would be tough, we knew that, and there was a lot of talk about my injury. Would I play or not? I wasn't sure. It hurt, and sure, I didn't mind ignoring the pain.

It was the Euros and I could have gone on with a knife stuck in a leg. But in football, there's both the short and the long perspective. There's the game today, and then the games tomorrow and the next day. You can sacrifice yourself in a game and make a huge impact, but then be knocked out. We had Spain now and then Russia after that, and then the quarter final if we would advance, and there was talk about me playing on painkillers. I had done that many times in Italy. But national team doctor was against it. Pain is a warning signal from your body. You can remove the pain but then you risk a serious injury. It's a bit of a gamble. A game with injury. How important is the game? How much will we bet to make the guy fit today? Is it worth the risk of then having him away for weeks or months afterwards? Those kind of questions, and traditionally the doctors in Sweden are being more careful than the ones on the continent. They look at the guy more as a patient than as football machine. But it's never easy, and as a player you're often pushing it yourself. There are games that feel so important that you want to say: Fuck the future! I don't care about the consequences. It's just that you can't avoid the future, and playing in the national team, there's always your club in the background.

They are the ones paying the big money, and I was a big investment. I couldn't break. I couldn't sacrifice myself for a national team game that had nothing to do with Inter, and the national team doctor received calls from the club doctor. Those talks can often be heated. Two interests are against each other. The club wants their player for the league and the national team needs the same player for the Euros.

It was also only a month before the pre-season training would begin, and I was Inter's most important player. But still, both doctors were reasonable persons. It was a calm discussion I think, despite everything, and they agreed. I wouldn't play on painkillers and I was treated for hours by a naprapath, and it was decided that I would play against Spain.

It was me and Henke on top and it felt fine. But Spain were very good. They got an early corner. Xavi hit it short to David Villa who played it backwards to Silva, who was alone, and he made a high pass to Fernando Torres. Torres fought with Petter Hansson over the ball but got one step ahead, and scored 1-0 almost with his hip. That was heavy. It's no game equalizing against Spain. But they backed down and try to secure the victory and their place in the quarter finals and we were given chance after chance and I forgot all about my knee. I pushed it. I worked hard and in the 34th minute I got a long nice pass from Fredrik Stoor in defence, and I came clear with their goalie Casillas, and I tried shooting straight in the goal. It was the kind of situation that Van Basten had talked to me about and Capello and Galbiati had trained me for, the kind of situations you have to use. But I missed, I didn't hit the ball well, and half a second later I had Ramos in front of me, the young defender from Real Madrid.

But I thought, fuck it, I wouldn't give up. I blocked, I kept him at distance and shot again in a small opening between him and another defender, and the ball went in. It was 1-1 and the game was on again and I was clearly in form. I had started the tournament great, but still, it didn't help. When the first half was over and the adrenaline disappeared, I could feel it, I was in pain. The knee was far from good. What

should I do? It wasn't an easy decision. I was being decisive for the team, and I couldn't break. There was at least one game ahead, and it looked good for us. We had three points from the game against Greece, and even if we lost today we could advance by winning the last group stage game against Russia. So I walked up to Lars Lagerbäck in half time.

"I have a lot of pain", I said.

"Oh, shit."

"I think we have to make a decision."

"Okay."

"What's most important to you: the second half now, or the game against Russia?"

"Russia", he said. "We have a better chance against them."

So I sat on the bench in the second half. Lagerbäck took in Markus Rosenberg instead, and it seemed promising. Spain had a lot of chances in the second half. But we stood up, and sure, it was obvious I didn't play. There was a quality to our game that was gone, the moment of unpredictability. I had been in great form and I was cursing my knee. Fuck. But the guys stood up well and after 90 minutes it was still 1-1. It looked like we would make it and we were cheering on the bench. Would we make this after all? But two minutes into extra time Markus Rosenberg lost the ball in an ugly way deep down on our side of the pitch. Lagerbäck jumped up and was like crazy. Fucking idiot referee!

It was a clear foul he said. But the referee let the game go on, and many were upset. Most guys on the bench said the referee had been against us all the time, and people were screaming and making fuzz, but not for long. Disaster came. Joan Capdevila who had taken the ball from Rosenberg hit a long cross and Fredrik Stoor tried to block it. But he was so tired. Everyone had fought like crazy. David Villa ran past him and Petter Hansson too, and shot 2-1, and the referee whistled for full time almost immediately after that. You can easily say that was a tough loss for us.

In the next game against Russia we were crushed. I had a lot of pain and it felt like Russia were better than us in all aspects, and we were kicked out of the Euros and we were so fucking disappointed. What had begun so great became nothing. It was cruel. But as always, when something disappears something else turns up and just before the Euros had begun I found out that Roberto Mancini had been fired from Inter.

He would be replaced by a guy named José Mourinho. I hadn't met him yet. But he had already surprised me. He tied me close to him already before we would meet. He would become a guy I could more or less die for.

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The Zlatan Court in Rosengård



## CHAPTER 21

I still did not know much about him. But of course, Mourinho was The Special one already back then, and I had heard a lot about him. He was supposed to be cocky and his press conferences were like shows and he said exactly what he felt. But I really didn't know much and I thought like: He's probably like Capello, a stone hard leader, and fine by me. I like that style. But I was wrong, partly anyway. Mourinho is a Portuguese, and he likes to be in the centre. He manipulates the players like no one else. Still that doesn't say much.

The guy learned a lot from Bobby Robson. Robson is an old NT coach for England. He coached the club Sporting Clube de Portugal at that time and needed a translator, and it happened to be Mourinho. Mourinho was good at languages. But Robson realized soon that the guy knew about other things as well. The kid was a fast thinker and he was easy to exchange ideas with, and one day Robson asked him to write a report on an opposing team. I have no idea what he expected. Like what does a translator know? But Mourinho's analysis was apparently totally first class.

Robson was just amazed. Here was a guy who had never played football on the highest level, but still could give him better material than he'd ever get. Like, damn, I have really underrated this translator. When Bobby Robson changed club, he took the guy with him and Mourinho learned things all the time, not only tactics and facts, but also psychological stuff. He used to say: "When your team is winning you're a part of it. But when they lose you're a bag of shit", and eventually he became a coach himself in Porto. It was 2002. He was really unknown then. For many he was still The translator, and Porto may have been a nice team in Portugal.

But come on, it was no big club. Porto had ended up in the middle of the table the year before and the Portuguese league, what was that? Not much in comparison. No one counted on Porto in the European

cups, especially not in the CL. But Mourinho came to the club with something really new: total awareness for every detail in the opposition team, and sure, I didn't understand any of it back then. But I was going to, believe me. At that time he talked a lot about transitions in football, when one team's attack is cut short and the guys must regroup really fast from attack to defense.

Those are important seconds. I situations like that one single unexpected maneuver, one little tactical mistake, can be decisive and Mourinho studied that closer than anyone in football and made the guys think analytical and fast. Porto became masters at using those situations, and against all odds they won not only the Portuguese league. They also played well in CL where they met teams like Manchester United and Real Madrid, clubs where one single player made as much money as the whole Porto team together. But Mourinho and his boys still won the CL.

It was like a big bang, and Mourinho became the hottest coach in the world. This was in 2004. Roman Abramovich, the Russian billionaire, had bought Chelsea and shoved money into the club, and first and foremost, he got Mourinho. But what do you think? That Mourinho was accepted in England? He was after all a foreigner. A Portuguese. Many snobs and journalists questioned him, and on one press conference he said:

"I'm not the guy from nowhere. I've won the CL with Porto. I'm special. I am a special one", and that stuck with him.

Mourinho became The Special One in English media, but I guess they said it with as much mockery as respect, at least at first. The guy pissed people off. Not only because he looked like a movie star. He said cocky things. He knew his worth, and sometimes he went hard on the competition. When he thought that Arsene Wenger in Arsenal were fixated with his Chelsea, he talked about Wenger as one of those guys who had binoculars at home and look into other families windows. It was always a mess around Mourinho.

But he didn't just talk. When he came to Chelsea the club had not won the league in fifty years. With Mourinho they won two years in a row. Mourinho was The Special one, and now he were on his way to us, and with his reputation on my mind I expected tough orders at once. But under EC they let me know that Mourinho was going to call me and I thought, has something happened?

He just wanted to talk. To say that it's going to be fun working together, looking forward to meet you, nothing special, not then, but he spoke in Italian, I didn't get it. Mourinho had never coached an Italian club. But still, he could speak better than me. He had learned the language in no time at all, in three weeks it's said, and I didn't understand at all. We started talking in English instead, and I felt it already then, he cared. He asks different questions, and after the game against Spain I got a text message.

I always get a lot of text messages. But this one was from Mourinho. Well played, he wrote and then he gave me some advice, and I promise, I jumped. I had never seen such a thing. A text message from the coach! I mean, I played with the NT, it wasn't his business. But he cared, and I answered and got new messages. It was wow, Mourinho is watching me. I felt seen. The guy may not be so tough and hard after all.

But yeah, I got it, he had a purpose with his text's. He wanted to trigger me. Create loyalty. But I liked him right away. We clicked. We understood each other, and I realized right away, this man works hard. He works double as much as everyone else. Watching football all day and all night and do his analyses. Never met a coach with so much knowledge about the opposition team. It's not the usual, look they play like this and that, they have this and that tactic, and you have to watch out for this player. It was everything, every little detail, like, down to the shoe number of the third GK. It was everything. It was a feeling right away; this guy knows his thing.

But it took some time before I met him. It was EC and vacation, and I don't really know what I expected. I had seen a lot of pictures of him. He was elegant, he sure of himself, but still, I was surprised. He was a short man with small shoulders, and he looked little amongst the players.

But I still felt it; there was a vibe around him. He got people to stand in line, and he went up to guys who thought they were untouchable and bossed them around. He stood there, one head shorter, and didn't try to tune in, not at all. He went right to the point and said very coldly: From now on you do like this and like this. Do you get it! And everyone started to listen. They were tense to understand every shade in his words. Not that they were afraid of him. After all, he was no Capello. He created personal bonds to the players with his text messages and mail's and his commitment and his knowledge about how he had it with our wife's and children and he never shouted. People got it anyway, and everyone understood right away, this guy knows stuff. He works hard to prepare us. He built us before and up to the games. It was like a theatre, a psychological game. He could show us movies where we had played bad, and say: "Look at this! So bad! So hopeless! This can't be you. It must be your brothers, the bad versions of you", and we nodded, we agreed. We were ashamed.

"I don't want to see you like that today!" he continued. No, no, we thought, not a chance. "Go out like hungry lions, like warriors", he continued and we shouted: "Absolutely, nothing else is good enough."

"In the first duel you should be like this...", he went on about. He hit his fist in his palm. "And in the second duel..."

He kicked the bulletin board so that it flew away in the room, and the adrenaline started to boil in us, and we went out like wild people. It was stuff like that all the time, unexpected things that triggered us, and I felt more and more, this guy gives everything for the team, so I want to give everything for him. It was some sort of quality he had. You wanted to kill for him. But it wasn't just about pep talk. The guy could put you down with a couple of words, like come in to the dressing room at be really cold and say:

"You have done zero today, Zlatan, zero. You haven't done shit", and in moments like this I didn't shout back.

I didn't defend myself one bit, not because I was scared or had excessive respect for him, but because I understood that he was right. I hadn't done a thing, and for Mourinho it didn't mean shit what you have done yesterday or the day before that. The actual day was what was important. It was now:

"Get out there and play football."

I remember a game against Atalanta. The day after I was going to accept the award for best foreign player and best player in Serie A, but when the first half was over we were down two-zero and I had been kind of invisible, and in the locker room Mourinho came up to me.

"You're getting awards tomorrow, right?"

"Uhm, yes."

"Do you know what you should say when you accept the award?"

"No, what?"

"You should be ashamed. You should blush. You should know that you haven't won a shit. One can't be given prizes when they're so worthless. You should give away that prize to your mom, or someone who deserves it better", he said and felt: I'll show him, he'll see that I'm worth that award, just wait for the second half, doesn't matter if I start spitting blood, I'll show him. I'll dominate again.

It was stuff like that all the time. He pumped me up and broke me down. He was a master at manipulating the team, and there was only one thing that really bothered me, his facial expression when we played. Didn't matter what I did, or what kind of goals I scored, he always had that ice cold look on his face. There were never smiles or gestures, anything at all. It was like nothing had happened at all, like it was slow play in the middle of the pitch, and by then I was better than ever. I did amazing stuff, but on Mourinho it looked like it was raining.

For example, we played against Bologna, and in the twenty fourth minute Adriano, the Brazilian, dribbled on the left flank. He made a cross, a hard one that was too low for me to put my head on it and too high to shot on volley, and I was really jostled in the penalty area. But I took one step forward and made a back heel. It looked like a karate kick, just bam, straight in the net. It was sick. It was later chosen as goal of the year, and the crowd went crazy, people stood up and shouted and applauded, everyone, even Moratti in his honorary seat.

But Mourinho, What did he do? He stood there in his suit and with his hands down his pockets with a cold stone face. What the hell is wrong with that man, I thought. If he doesn't react on something like that, what gets him going then?

I talked to Rui Faria about that. Rui Faria is from Portugal as well. He's a fitness coach and Mourinho's right hand. Those two have followed each other from club to club and know each other really, really well.

"Explain one thing for me", I told him.

"Alright, sure!"

"I have scored goals this season that I really don't know myself how I managed to do them. I don't think Mourinho has ever seen anything like them. But still he just stands there like a statue."

"Take it easy kid", Rui said. "He's like that. He doesn't react like the rest of us."

Maybe not, I thought. But still... I'll fucking make sure to spark some life into him, even if I have to do a miracle. In one way or another I'll make that man cheer.





## CHAPTER 22

I had a little hang up on the Champions League. We had started the league and my knee was better and I was scoring great goals all the time, and we felt quite soon that we probably would win the scudetto that year too. But understand me correctly, it wasn't a big deal anymore. I had won the Italian league four times already, and been named the best player of the league. Champions League felt like the important thing. I had never advanced far in that tournament and now we were facing Manchester United in the round of last 16.

United was one of the best teams in Europe and they had won Champions League the year before and had players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney, Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, Nemanja Vidic, but none of them carried their game, on the contrary: you really had the sense that United was a team. No players was bigger than the club. No coach had that philosophy more than Alex Ferguson, Sir Alex Ferguson maybe I should say. Everyone knows Sir Alex. He's a god in England, and he never wore out his players. He rotated them.

From the beginning Ferguson is a working class kid from Scotland, and when he came as a coach to United in 1986 they didn't have much going for them. United seemed to have their glory days behind them. Not much worked, and the players were drinking at bars. It was considered cool. But Ferguson began a war against that. What the fuck, drinking beer! He got some discipline into the guys. He won 21 titles with the club and was knighted in 1999 when United won the league, the FA-cup and Champions League. So you get it, there was a rivalry between a guy like that and Mourinho. There was a lot talk.

It was Mourinho against Sir Alex, and it was Cristiano Ronaldo against Zlatan. There was a lot of media about it. We were the two main names for Nike and we had done a commercial together, a duel where we made some tricks and shot at goal, a fun thing with Eric Cantona as host. But I didn't know him. We never met during filming. All was done in different places, and I didn't really care about that media stuff. But I felt triggered. We had a good chance and of course Mourinho had prepared us well. But the first game at San Siro was a disappointment. We only got 0-0, and I didn't really get into the game. Of course afterwards the English newspapers wrote a lot of crap. But that was their problem, not mine. They could write their garbage. I didn't care. But I really wanted to win the return game at Old Trafford and get further in the Champions League. It was a thing that grew in me, and I remember running out on the Stadium's pitch hearing all the applause and all the booing.

There was a lot of tension in the air, and Mourinho was wearing a black suit and a black coat. He looked serious, and was as always standing up. He was close to the sideline watching the game, like a general at a battle field, and the crowd screamed: "Sit down Mourinho", and he was often waving and screaming things like "Get up there and help Ibra!" I was too alone at the top and I was heavily marked. A lot depended on me. That's how it had been all season, and Mourinho played 4-5-1 with me on top, and I felt the pressure to score, and sure, I liked it. I wanted responsibility.

But United were better and I was way too isolated and constricted up there, and I was cursing. But worst of all, after only three minutes, Ryan Giggs took a corner and Vidic headed 1-0. It was like a cold shower. The entire Old Trafford stood up and screamed:  
"You're not special anymore, José Mourinho."

It was Mourinho and me who got most of the booing. But the game worked more and more and the fact was: one goal would be enough in that situation and we would go through to the next round. If we only scored 1-1 the victory would be ours, and I started playing well. It worked better and better and after thirty minutes I received a long pass in the box and headed it down on the goal line. The ball bounced up, hit the crossbar and went out. You don't get closer than that without scoring. And I felt it more, we can do this, and we had chance after chance. Adriano had a volley shot in the post. But no, it didn't work. Instead, Wayne Rooney dribbled outside our box, made a pass to Cristiano who headed 2-0, and it felt like shit. It was difficult, and minutes passed without us scoring. Towards the end of the game the whole stadium was singing:

"Bye, bye, Mourinho. It's over". And I wanted to kick and break something valuable, and I remember when we got back in the dressing room. Mourinho tried to cheer us up, like: now we go for the league. He's

tough as hell before and after the games, and sometimes when a day or two has passed and he's analyzed a loss he can come attacking us for us not to repeat our mistakes. But there's no reason to butcher us in a situation like that. It wouldn't do any good. We were down and depressed as it was.

It felt like everyone wanted to murder someone, and I think that's when that thought started growing in me. I wanted to move on. I'm the restless kind. I have always moved. I switched schools, homes, clubs already as a kid. It became like a poison in me and when I was sitting there looking down on my legs I started suspecting: I would never win the Champions League with Inter. I didn't think the team was good enough, and already in the first interviews after the game I started showing my doubts. Or, I was just answering honestly, and it wasn't the good old: Of course, we'll win next year.

"Can you win the Champions League if you stay with Inter?", the reporters asked.

"I don't know. We'll see", I replied, and the fans probably sensed something already then.

That was the beginning of the tensions, and I talked to Mino. "I want to move on", I said. "I wanna go to Spain." He knew exactly. Spain meant Real Madrid or Barcelona, the two top clubs, and sure, Real felt tempting. Real had an amazing tradition and had had players like Ronaldo, Zidane, Figo, Roberto Carlos, Raul. But I was more and more leaning towards Barca who played amazing football that year and had guys like Lionel Messi, Xavi and Iniesta.

But how could we act? It wasn't easy. I couldn't just say: I wanna go to Barca. Not only because it would ruin my reputation in Inter. It would be like offering yourself for free: I'll play for nothing. You can't expose yourself like that. Then the managers understand they can get you cheap. No, the club had to approach you. The management had to feel that they wanted you at any price. But the real problem wasn't there.

The problems were my status and my conditions in Italy. I was viewed as too expensive. I was the player who couldn't leave. I often heard that. It was me in Inter, Kaka in Milan, Messi in Barca and Cristiano in United. No one was expected being able to match our contracts. Our price tags would be too high. Even Mourinho talked about it. "Ibra is staying", he said. "No club can pay the kind of money it would take. No one can pay a hundred million euros", and it felt absurd.

Was I too expensive for the market? A fucking unsellable Mona Lisa? I didn't know. The situation was uncertain, and maybe it was stupid being so open in the media, despite everything. I should probably have done the same bullshit many other stars did: I will always stay in my club, bla bla bla.

But I can't do it like that. I couldn't lie. I wasn't sure about the future, and I said so and that irritated a lot of people, especially the fans. It was looked on as treason, or at least something like that, and many became worried. Would I lose my motivation in the team? Especially when I said stuff like "I'd like to test something new. I've been in Italy for five years now. I like technical football and they play that in Spain." There was a lot of talk and a lot of speculation.

But it wasn't like a tactic of mine, not a trick to get away from the club. It was just being honest, but nothing was simple, not for a player at my level. I was the most important guy in Inter and no one wanted me to leave. There was commission after every word I said, and maybe the whole thing was pointless. We didn't have an offer, and I didn't exactly become cheaper. Sure, I wanted something new. But it didn't affect my game, on the contrary, I was out of injuries and better than ever, and I continued doing everything to make Mourinho react.

Like against Reggina, I made a nice run, a dribbling almost from the middle of the pitch. I passed three defenders, and only that was a performance, and the crowd probably thought I'd finish with a hard shot. But I saw that the goalie was a bit too far from his goal, and I had an image, a thought, and I chipped the ball high over the guy, and it couldn't have been more perfect. The ball sailed in a nice path in under the crossbar and the whole stadium went wild, everyone except Mourinho of course who just stood there in his gray suit, chewing his gum. It was business as usual in other words. But still, it was more beautiful than many things I'd done, and with that goal I came up in tied first place of the top scorer chart with Bologna's Marco Di Vaio. Becoming top scorer in Italy is big, and I was focusing more and more on that. It was a challenge I needed. I became more aggressive than ever in front of the goal, and no one loves a



goal scorer more than the Italian fans. No one hates a goal scorer who wants to leave his club more either, on the other hand. And things didn't become easier when I after the game said:  
"I'm totally focused at winning the league this season, but we'll see about next season."

You can easily say that the tensions increased: What's up with Ibra? What's happening? It was still long before Silly season, and we didn't have anything concrete. But the papers were already speculating. It was me and Cristiano Ronaldo in Manchester United. Would Real buy one of us? And could they afford it? There were new rumours all the time. For example there were speculations about a swap deal, their star Gonzalo Higuain against me.

That way the club wouldn't have to pay so much money. Higuain would be part of the price. But like I said, it was just talk, or more correctly, nothing in the media is just talk. It affects no matter how false it is, and many wanted to put me in my place. It was a lot like: No one is bigger than the club and stuff like that, Ibra is ungrateful and a traitor, that whole thing. But I didn't care.

I kept going and against Fiorentina I shot an amazing free kick on overtime which was clocked at 109 km/hr and just smashed into goal from far away and it looked like we were securing the league victory, and like said, everything was connected. Everything had two sides. The better I was, the more upset the fans became because I wanted to leave the club, and the atmosphere was explosive before the game against Lazio in May 2009. The Ultras had written "Welcome Maximillian" and stuff like that. They could show love. But they could hate as well, and not only the other teams, but their own players, and I felt it instantly when I came in, San Siro was boiling.

All that week the papers had written about me wanting to leave Italy and try something new. No one could have missed that and already in the beginning of the game I got stuck in the box. I was fighting, but just couldn't shoot, and in situations like that the fans usually cheer. Like, good try. But now I heard booing and whistling from the Ultras. Like what the fuck, we're fighting hard down here, we're on top of the league and you come with shit like that. Who are you? I hushed them. Put my finger to the mouth. But that didn't help, not at all, and at the end of the first half it was still 0-0 despite us having pressure, and then they started booing the whole team, and I flipped, or more correctly, I was pumped even more by adrenaline.

I would show them, and like I said, I play better when I'm angry. Think about that when you see me furious, don't worry. Okay, I can do something stupid and get a red card. But most of the time it's a good sign. All my career is built on getting back, getting even, and in the second half I received the ball 15 meters outside the box. I turned around. I rushed forward. I made a move and shot the ball in the net between two defenders. It was a shot of pure anger, a nice goal. But it wasn't the goal people talked about.

It was my gesture, because I wasn't cheering. I ran backwards away from the Ultras, all the time hushing them with my finger. It was like: Shut up. This is my reply to your shit. I score you boo, and that immediately became the big thing from that game: Did you see? Did you? It was something completely new.

It was an open conflict between the fans the the club's biggest player, and over by the sideline was Mourinho, and of course, no cheering from him. Who had expected that? But of course he agreed with me. Fuck, booing at your own team, and he pointed at his head, like: "You're fucking stupid, you up there in the stands", and you get it, if things were tense before they got worse now, the stadium was rumbling. But I continued playing well. I played on pure anger and assisted 2-0. I dominated and was pleased when the final whistle blew. But this wasn't over, not at all. When I left the pitch I was told that the bosses of the Ultras were waiting for me down in the locker room. I had no idea how they had managed to get there.

But down there in the corridors they stood, seven, eight guys, and not the kind of guys who say: Excuse me, can we have a word? They were the type of guys from my kind of streets: guys full of aggression and everyone around me became nervous, and my pulse went up to 150. Honestly, I was stressed. But I told myself: You can't chicken out now. Where I come from you don't back off. So I walked up to them, and I

immediately saw that they became nervous, but at the same time toughened up. What the fuck, Ibra is coming up to us.

"Are people having problems up there in the stands?" I said.

"Yeah, well, many are pissed off...", they started.

"Then tell them to come down on the field, and we work it out there, one on one!"

And then I left, and my heart was pounding. Still it felt good. I had handled the stress. I had stood up for myself, but the shit continued. The supporter club demanded an official meeting. But come on? Why would I meet them again? What could I gain from that? I was a football player. Maybe the fans were faithful to their team, and that's nice. But a football player has a short career. He must look after his own interests. He switches clubs. The fans knew that. I knew that, and I told them: apologize for your booing and whistling on your website, and I'm satisfied. Then we can forget about this. But nothing happened. Or well, the Ultras decided they would neither boo nor cheer me. They would pretend I didn't exist. Well good luck, I thought.

It wasn't easy ignoring me, not then, and not later. I was in form and the talking continued. Will he leave? Will he stay? Can anyone afford him? It was a tug of war and I was afraid of ending up in a dead end. Become a player who stays in his club with his tail down between his legs. It was a nervous game, and I called Mino: Are there any offers? Is something happening? Nothing happened, and it became more clear, it would take record amounts to get me away, if even that would be enough, and I tried to close my eyes and ears and not listen to the circus in the media. But it wasn't easy. Not when you were in that situation. I had constant contact with Mino and I was hoping more and more for Barca. Barca won the Champions League around that time. They beat Manchester United with 2-0 after goals by Eto'o and Messi, and I thought, wow, that's the club, and I continued calling Mino:

"Fuck, what are you doing? Are you sleeping?"

"Go fuck yourself", Mino said. "You're shit. No one wants you. You'll have to return to Malmö FF."

"Fuck you!"

But of course he was working his ass off to make something happen, not only because he always fought for me. This was the deal we both had been dreaming about. Sure, it could screw up and end with us not winning anything except pissing off the Ultras and the management. But it could also be the biggest thing ever, and we were prepared to put a lot at stake.

At the same time I continued playing. We had secured the Scudetto already. But I really wanted to become the top scorer. Being the Capocannoniere is putting you in the history books, and no Swede had done that since Gunnar Nordahl back in 1955. But now I had the chance, nothing was for sure, not at all. It was a tight race in the top. Marco Di Vaio in Bologna and Diego Milito in Genoa were side by side, and of course, it wasn't Mourinho's business. He was coaching the team. But he stepped forward in the locker room and said:

"Now we are going to make sure Ibra becomes the top scorer too" and it became a thing. Everyone would help me. Everyone said it.

But Balotelli, the fucker; in one of the last games he got the ball in the box and I came running. I was alone, clear in front of goal. I had the perfect chance. But Balotelli kept on dribbling and I looked at him: What the fuck are you doing? Weren't you going to help me? I was pissed off, but sure, the guy was young. And he scored. I couldn't start yelling at him then. But I was pissed, our whole bench was pissed off: Fuck running around there scoring when Zlatan has the perfect opportunity, and I thought, if that's the way it is, fuck the Capocannoniere. Thanks, Balotelli. But I got over it.

I scored in the next game, and before the last round the standings were like a thriller. Me and Marco Di Vaio both had scored 23 goals, and right behind us was Diego Milito in Genoa with 22. It was on May 31st. All the media talked about the fight. Who will win? It was a hot day. The league was done. We had secured the scudetto a long time ago. Still there were a lot of nerves in the air. With a bit of luck this would be my goodbye to the Italian league. I hoped so. I didn't know. But no matter if this would be my thanks-and-bye-show or not I wanted to play a great game and become the top scorer. Fuck no, I wasn't gonna finish with a bad game.

But of course, it wasn't up to just me. It was also up to Di Vaio and Milito as well, and they played at the same time. Di Vaio's Bologna played against Catania and Milito's Genoa faced Lecce, and I didn't doubt for a second that those fuckers would score. I was forced to respond. I had to score, and that's not easy doing on request like that. If you try to hard your game locks up. All goal scorers know that. You can't think too much. It's about instinct. You have to just strike, and I noticed early that it would be a difficult game against Atalanta. It was 1-1 after only a few minutes.

In the 12th minute, Esteban Cambiasso shot a long ball, from just outside our box, and I was standing up there on line with the defenders. But then I ran, almost offside and the defense couldn't keep up. I ran like crazy and came alone with their goalie. But the ball bounced weird, and I pushed it forward with my knee and was almost colliding with the goalie. But right before that I shot to the right of him, and it went in, 2-1, and by then I was the top scorer. People were yelling that at me, and I started to hope, maybe this would work out. But things happened, and I never really got it. Sure, from the sideline they yelled "Milito and DiVaio have scored", something like that. But I wouldn't believe it. It sounded like something they just yelled. There is a lot of that in football, bullshit just to trigger people or annoy, so I just kept playing. I shut everything else out, and I thought that one goal would be enough. But the other games were really dramatic.

Diego Milito was in third place. He's an Argentine. He had an incredible scoring record. Only a week before, he had signed for Inter. So if I didn't leave the club we would play together. But now against Lecce he had an amazing game. He scored two goals in just ten minutes and now had 24, just like me, and you could feel it in the air, a third goal could come at any minute. But it wasn't just Milito. Also Marco Di Vaio scored. I didn't know that. But now three guys were sharing the top spot, and that's no way of winning. You don't share. You win it alone, and even though I didn't know for sure, I more and more realized that I would have to score one more goal. I felt it from the atmosphere. You could see it in the faces of the guys on the bench, the pressure from the audience. But minutes passed. Nothing happened. It seemed like a draw. It was 3-3 and only ten minutes to go. Mourinho brought on Hernan Crespo. He needed new blood.

He was going for attack, and was waving his arms, like: move up and keep pushing! Was I losing the grip of the Capocannoniere? I was afraid so and I fought hard. I yelled for the ball. But many were tired. It had been a tight, even game. But sure, Crespo still had energy. He was dribbling on the right side and I ran towards goal. I got a long pass and there was a fight over the ball. But I pushed a guy away and I came with my back towards the goal while the ball was bouncing around and I saw an opportunity. But, like I said, I was facing the wrong direction, so what do you do? You heel it. I heeled backwards in an angle and sure, I had scored many heel goals in my career, like the one against Italy in the Euros of course and the karate thing against Bologna. But this, in this situation, was just too much.

It couldn't go in. It was a show like in mom's yard, and you don't win the top scoring league on a thing like that in the final game. It just doesn't happen. But the ball rolled in the net. It was 4-4 and I tore my shirt off, though I knew it would give me a yellow card. But oh my god, this was huge, and I stopped at the corner flag and they all were on me of course, Crespo and everyone. They pushed me down. It almost looked aggressive, and they were screaming, all of them: You're the top scorer!

And slowly it sank into me, this was historical, and I thought, this is my way of responding. When I came to Italy, people were saying: Zlatan doesn't score enough goals. Now I was the top scorer. Capocannoniere. No one could have any doubts now. But I stayed quite cool. I walked back out on the pitch and what really made me jump was something completely different.

It was Mourinho that old stone face. He who never changed his face had finally woken up. He went crazy. He was screaming and cheering like a little school kid, jumping up and down, and I smiled: I could get you going after all. But it took quite an effort. I had to become the Capocannoniere with a heel kick.

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## CHAPTER 23

June third, Kaka went to Real Madrid for sixty five million Euros, and a sometime later Cristiano Ronaldo was sold for to the same club for hundred million. That said a lot about the level of it, and I went to Moratti. Moratti was kind of cool, you know. He'd been around. He knew the business.

"Listen", I said. "It has been incredible years and I'd love to stay, and I don't care if United or Arsenal or anyone comes. But if Barca would show up..."

"Yes", he said.

"Then I want you to at least talk to them. Not that you're going to sell me for this or that sum, absolutely not. It's up to you. But promise that you'll talk to them", I continued, and then he looked at me with his glasses and tousled hair, and of course, he got it, there was some money to make, despite the fact that he was reluctant to sell me.

"Alright", he said. "I promise."

We went to Los Angeles on a training camp not much later. It was at the beginning of the pre-season. I shared room with Maxwell, and that sounded promising, like old times. But we were jet lagged and tired, and the journalists were wild. They flocked outside the hotel and the big thing of the day was that Barca couldn't afford me. They were going for David Villa instead, not that the newspapers knew shit, but still, I had doubts myself. It had been up and down the last weeks. I was in despair. I had hope at one point, and now it looked bad again and it didn't get better because of that fucking Maxwell.

Maxwell is the kindest person in the world, like I've said. But then he was driving me mad. We had followed each other since the first day in Amsterdam and we were now in the same situation again. We were both linked to Barca. But he was one step ahead, or even worse, he was really on his way while the door was closing for me. In addition, he couldn't sleep. He just talked on the phone: Is it done? Is it? It got on my nerves. He was talking all the time. Barca this and Barca that. He went on all the time, day and night, that's how it felt at least. I was surrounded by that talk when at the same time I didn't hear anything about my deal, not much anyway. I drove me crazy. I got mad at Mino, damn Mino, fix it for Maxwell but not for me, and I called him.

"So you can work for him but not for me?" I said.

"Go and fuck yourself", Mino said, and not much later Maxwell was a done deal for Barca.

Unlike my situation where the whole process was followed by the media he had managed to keep the negotiations in secret. No one believed that he was going to Barcelona. But when we that day stepped into the dressing room where everyone sat in a ring and waited for us, he told it like it were:

"I'm going to Barcelona!"

People flew up: Really? Is it true? They started talking. Stuff like this gets people going. Inter wasn't Ajax. The guys were cooler, but still, Barca had won the CL. Barca was the best team in the world. Obviously some of the guys were jealous, and Maxwell started to almost embarrassed to pack his stuff and football shoes.

"Take my shoes also", I said out loud. "I'm coming after you", then everyone started laughing, like what a joke.

I was too expensive to be sold, the thought. Or that I had it too well in Inter. No, Ibra stays. No one can afford him. It was what they thought.

"Sit down! You're not going anywhere", people shouted, and I joked around a little bit more, but honestly, I wasn't sure myself.

I just knew that Mino worked as much as he could for me, and that nothing or everything could happen. One of those days we met Chelsea in a training game, and I got a tackle from John Terry. My hand was in pain afterwards. But I ignored it then. The hand? I couldn't care less about it. You play with your feet, and I had other things to think about. Barca was buzzing in my head and I called Mino over and over again. It was like I had a fever in my body. But instead of good news I got a new knock.

Joan Laporta was the president in Barcelona. He was really a big shot. It was under his time the club had started to dominate Europe again, and I heard that he had flown with a private jet to Milano to eat dinner with Moratti and Marco Branca, the sporting director. I have of course hopes for that meeting. But nothing came out of it. Laporta had barely gotten out of the door before Moratti said:

"If you're here for Zlatan you can go home again! He's not for sale."

I got furious when I heard about it. What the hell, they had promised, so I called Branca: What is Moratti doing? Branca didn't want to take any blame. The meeting wasn't about you, he said. It was a lie. I knew that though Mino and I felt betrayed. But alright, I understood, it was a game. At least it could be. Not for sale could be another way to say expensive. But I had no clue what was really going on, and those damn journalists were like crazy. They asked all the time: What's happening? Are a Barca player? Will you stay at Inter? I had no answers to give. I was in no man's land, and even Mino who was working like crazy started to sound pessimistic:

"Barca is on, but they can't get them to let go!" he said.

I walked on needles, and it was hot and messy in L.A. Also some stuff happened that indicated that I was going to stay. For the next season in Inter I was going to get the number ten shirt, the same number Ronaldo had. It was a lot of that, PR-stunts and other I got engaged for. Everything was insecure. The air was tense.

I heard that Joan Laporta and Txiki Begiristain, Barca's sporting director, was in a private jet again. The trip had nothing to do with me. They guys were on their way to Ukraine to buy Dmytro Tjyhrnskyj, one of the key players in FK Sjachtar Donetsk who very unexpectedly had won the UEFA-cup that year. But the

trip got a meaning for us after all. Mini is slick, a fox. He knows the tricks. At that time he have had another meeting with Moratti, and felt an opening, after all. That's why he called Txiki Begiristain who sat in the plane with Laporta. They were on their way back to Barcelona.

"You should land in Milano instead", Mino said.

"Why?"

"Because I know that Moratti is at his house right now, and if you knock on the door, I think you can fix a deal with Ibrahimovic."

"Alright, wait five minutes. I have to discuss this with Laporta."

It was some long minutes and a high stake gambling. Moratti hadn't promised anything, and he had no clue that he was going to get visitors. But now it all happened at once. Txiki Begiristain called back.

"Alright", he said. "We'll turn back. We'll land in Milano instead", and of course, I got to know about it right away.

Mino called. There was calls and text's here and there. The phones were on fire. Moratti was informed: "The Barca management is on their way to your house!" Maybe he thought that it was sudden, I don't know, or that the guys could have booked a meeting in advance. But obviously, he received them.

He had style. He didn't want to show lack of respect, and in that moment I didn't hesitate. I wanted to do what I could.

I sent a text to Marco Branca. I wrote: "I know that Barca's management is on their way to Moratti. You have promised me to talk to them, and you know that I want to move to that club. Don't mess this up, and I won't mess things up for you", and I waited a long time for an answer. I didn't get one. They had probably their reasons. Like I said, it's all a game. But now I could feel it, it's serious now. It's happening now! Or the door is getting shut. It either or, and the minutes went on. What were they talking about in there? I had no clue.

I knew when they were going to meet and I looked at my clock and I expected it to take several hours. But after twenty five minutes Mino called, and I jumped up of course. What was it now? Had Moratti kicked them out at once again? My pulse rocketed. I got a dry mouth.

"Yes", I said.

"It's done", he answered.

"What's done?"

"You're going to Barcelona. Pack your bag."

"Don't be fucking kidding about stuff like this."

"I'm not kidding."

"How in hell did it happen so fast?"

"I don't have time to talk now."

He hung up and I got and at the same time didn't get it. It was buzzing in my head. I was at the hotel. What was I supposed to do? I went out in the hall. I needed someone to talk to, and there was Patrick Vieira and you can trust that guy.

"I'm going to Barca", I said.

He looked at me.

"Impossible", he answered.

"Yeah, I promise"

"For how much?"

I didn't know. I had no idea and I noticed it on him, he was doubtful. He thought I was too expensive, and I got doubts myself. Could it really be true? But soon Mino called again, and then it all made sense. Moratti had made a surprise.

He had only one demand, and it was a big one. He wanted to get one over Milan and sell me for more than what Real bought Kaka for, and that wasn't a small sum; it would mean the second biggest transfer ever, and Joan Laporta had apparently no problems with that.

He and Moratti had made a deal pretty quickly, and it took a while to digest the sums when I heard them. My eighty five million in the Ajax deal, what was that? Pennies in comparison. We were talking about close to seven hundred million in Swedish Kronor now.

Inter would get forty six million Euro in cash, and at the same time get Samuel Eto'o as part of the payment, and Samuel Eto'o wasn't nobody. He had score thirty goals last season. He was one of the best goal scorers in the history of Barcelona and he was worth twenty million Euros. Together it became sixty six million Euros, one million Euros more than what Milan sold Kaka, and you know. It was an uproar when it came out. I had never been through such a thing.

It was forty four degrees. It was like the air was boiling. Everyone was on me, and I felt it... I don't know, honestly. I couldn't think properly. We were going to have a training game against a Mexican team, and for the first time I had that number ten shirt in Inter, and for the last time for that matter. The years in the club were over. I started to get it. I had come to Inter when they hadn't won the league in seventeen years. Now we had won it three years in a row, and I had become the top goal scorer. It was insane, and I glanced at Mourinho, the Mourinho who I had at last gotten a reaction from when I score and I noticed, he was angry, and sad.

He didn't want to lose me, and he put me on the bench in that game, and I felt it too: I was happy to go to Barca, but it wasn't fun to leave Mourinho. That man is special. The year after he went to Real and in that turn he said goodbye to Materazzi. Materazzi is like the toughest defender in the world. But when he hugged Mourinho he started to cry, and I understand him in some way. Mourinho gets your feelings going, and I remember the day after when we met outside the hotel. He came up to me:

"You can't leave."

"Sorry, I have to take this chance."

"But if you leave then I'll leave too."

Oh my god, how do you answer to such a thing? It was something that got to me. If you leave then I'll leave too.

"Thank you", I said. "You've taught me a lot."

"Thank you too", he said.

We talked for a while, it was nice. But that man, he's like me. He has pride and wanted to win at any cost, and of course, he couldn't resist. He taunted me a bit as well:

"Hey, Ibra!"

"Yes?"

"You're going to Barca to win the CL, right?"

"Yes, maybe a little."

"But you know, we're the ones who're going to win it. Don't forget that. We'll win!"

Then we said goodbye.

I flew to Copenhagen and we got to our house at Limhamnsvägen and met up with Helena and the children. I was so anxious to tell about everything and come down to earth a little bit. But our home was like under siege. Journalists and fans slept outside our house. They rang our door. People shouted and sang out there. They were waving Barca flags. It was pure madness and my whole family got stressed out, my mom, dad, Sanela, Keki, no one dared to go out. People were after them as well, and I ran around and of course, I felt that my hand was in pain, but I didn't think about it that much.

Things were happening all the time, details in my contract were put in. Eto'o was screwing around and wanted more money, Helena and I were discussing where to live, all that. There was no chance to come down to earth and think everything through, and after only two days I went to Barcelona. At that time I was already used to private planes. It may sound snobby. But it's not easy for me on those ordinary flights. Everyone's on me. Chaos is created on the plane and airport.

But now I took an ordinary flight. I had talked to the Barca gang on the phone, and as you know, Barca and Real are at war. They're big rivals, and there's a lot of politics in it, Catalonia against the central power, all that, but the clubs also have different philosophies.

"In Barcelona we keep our feet on the ground. We're not like Real. We take ordinary flights", they told me, and sure, that sounded sympathetic. I flew with Spanair and landed around five at the afternoon in Barcelona, and if I hadn't understood the level of it yet, I got it now.

It was chaos. Hundreds of fans and journalists were waiting for me and the newspapers were writing about it all the time. They talked about Ibramania. It was insane. I wasn't just the most expensive transfer in Barca history. No other new player had ever brought the kind of attention before. I was going to be presented at the arena, Camp Nou, that day. It's a tradition for the club. When Ronaldinho came in 2003 thirty thousand people were there. The same amount was at the arena when Thierry Henry came. But now... at least the double were waiting for me, and I shuddered, honestly.

We were going to hold a press conference first. Several hundred journalists were there in the room. There were worries: Why isn't he coming? But we could still not go in. Eto'o was messing with Inter to the end and Barcelona was waiting for a final confirmation on the deal and the time went and the voices in there became more and more heated and nervous: there was an outbreak in the air. We heard it as if we were in the middle of it. Me, Mino and Laporta and the other big shots sat behind the scene and waited: What's happening? Are we going to sit here forever?

"It's enough now", Mino said.

"We must have the confirmation..."

"Screw it", he said and got the others with him and we went in eventually.

I had never seen that many reporters and I answered the questions, but all the time I heard how it roared out there at the arena. Everything was crazy, I promise, and afterwards I went and changed into the Barca clothes. They gave me number nine, the same number that Ronald had in the club, and no it really started to get emotional. The arena was boiling. It was sixty or seventy thousand people there and I tried to catch my breath, and then I went out. I will never be able to describe it.

I had a ball in my hand and I went to the rack they had put up and around me the crowd was shouting. They were shouting my name. The whole arena roared and the press guy ran around and told me stuff all the time: "Say Visca barca", Go Barca, and I did as he said, and I did some tricks, back heels and stuff like that, and the crowd just shouted more and more and then I kissed the badge on the shirt, and I have to tell you this.

I got a lot of shit for that thing: how could he kiss the badge when he had just left Inter? Didn't he care about his former fans? Everyone was moaning about that shit. But the press guys had told me to do it. They were really wild: "Kiss the badge, kiss the badge", and I was like a little boy. I obeyed. My whole body was vibrating, and I remember that I wanted to go inside the locker room to calm down.

It was too much adrenalin. I was shaky, and when it was over I looked at Mino. Mino had never been more than ten meters away from me. In moments like that he's everything to me, and together we went into the locker room and looked at all the names on the wall, Messi, Xavi, Iniesta, Henry and Maxwell, all of them, and then mine, Ibrahimovic. It was there already, and then I looked at Mino again. He was quite taken. It was like he had a child. None of us could get it. It felt bigger than we had expected, and in that moment I got a text in my phone. Who was it? It was Patrick Vieira. "Enjoy", he wrote. "These things doesn't happen to a lot of players", and honestly, you can hear everything from everyone possible. But when guys like Vieira sends you a message like that, then you know, you have been through something incredible, and I sat down and took a breath.

Afterwards I told the journalists: "I'm the happiest man in the world!" "This is the biggest thing that has happened to me since the birth of my boys", stuff like that, other athletes may have said it before in similar situations. But I really meant it. This was big, and I went to hotel Princesa Sofia that also was under siege by fans who thought it was awesome to see me drinking coffee in the lobby.

At night I had trouble sleeping, not so strange obviously. My body was on fire and sure, I felt it, my hand wasn't in such a good condition. But I didn't think about it so much then either. There were so many other things to think about, and I didn't think there was going to be any problems at the medical the next day.



When you're new at a club it's routine that you get examined up and down: How much do you weigh? How tall are you? How many per cent body fat do you have? Do you feel healthy?

"My hand hurt", I said at the examination, and the doctors gave an x-ray.

I had a fissure in my hand, a fissure! It couldn't be true. One of the most important things when you're new in a club is that you get to train during the pre-season and get to learn the players and the game. But it looked bad now, and we had to make a quick decision. I spoke with the coach, Guardiola. He sounded nice and said that he was sorry that he couldn't be there to welcome me. He had been in London with the team, and just like everyone else he explained: you have to get healthy as soon as possible. We weren't going to take any risks and that's why it was decided that I was going to be operated on right away.

A hand surgeon put in two steel nails in my hand so that the fracture could heal quicker. The same day I went back to Los Angeles to training camp. Somehow it was absurd. I had just been there with Inter. No I arrived with a new club and a big plaster around my hand. It would take at least three weeks for me to get healthy.

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## CHAPTER 24

We were playing against Real Madrid at home at Camp Nou. It was November 2009. I had been away for fifteen days again. I had some discomfort in my thigh and I would start on the bench, and of course that wasn't fun. Not many things are as huge as El Clasico. The pressure was incredible. It's war, and the papers had extra editions with like 60 pages about the game. People don't talk about anything else. It's the big teams, the big enemies against each other.

I had a good start of the season despite the fracture in my hand and the whole adjustment to a new country. I had scored five goals in my first five games and I was praised everywhere. It felt good and La Liga was clearly the place to be. Real and Barca had invested almost 250 million euros in Kaka, Cristiano and me, and Serie A and Premier League had lost some. La Liga was the hot place now. Everything would be extraordinary. That's what I thought.

Already during pre-season when I ran around with plaster and nails in my hand I had become one of the gang. The language was a bit of a problem of course and I hung a lot with the guys who talked English, Thierry Henry and Maxwell. But it worked great with everyone. Messi, Xavi and Iniesta are down to earth, nice guys, killing on the football field, and very easy being around, far from "Here I come, I'm the greatest and most beautiful", not a sign of anything like that, and no fashion shows in the locker room like many Italian players have. Messi and the guys turned up in tracksuits and kept a low profile and then of course there was Guardiola.

He seemed OK. He came up to me after every practice and talked. He really wanted me to get into the team, but sure, the manners in the club were special. I had felt that immediately. It was like a school, a bit like Ajax. But this was Barca, the best team in the world. I had expected a bit more cocky attitude. But everyone was so silent and nice and part of the group, and sometimes I'd think: These guys are superstars. But still they act like school boys, and maybe that's sympathetic, what do I know? But I couldn't help thinking: How would these guys be treated in Italy? They would have been gods.

Now they all lined up for Pep Guardiola. Guardiola is a Catalan. He's an old midfielder. He won La Liga five or six times with Barcelona, and became their captain in 1997. When I came he had been the coach for two years and had had huge success. I'm sure the guy deserved all the respect, and I saw it as important trying to adjust and fit in. It wasn't like a new thing for me. I had switched clubs several times before, and I had never walked in telling people how to do things. I sense the atmosphere. Who's strong? Who's weak? What are they talking about and which are the different groupings?

At the same time I knew my qualities. I had proved what I could mean for a team with my winning mentality, and I used to take up space pretty quickly anyway, and make a lot of jokes. Not too long ago I kicked Chippen a bit for fun at a national team practice and I didn't understand a thing when I opened up the papers the next day. It was looked on as some mean attack. But it was nothing, nada. That's how we do it. It's playful and very serious at the same time. We're a bunch of guys who spend all days together and sometimes do some crazy stuff to keep going. It's not more difficult than that. We're joking. But in Barca I became boring. Too nice. And I didn't dare screaming on the pitch like I need to do.

The papers writing about me being a bad boy and all that helped. That made me wanting to prove the opposite and I'm sure I went too far. Instead of being myself I was trying to be the nicest guy around and that was stupid. You can't let media bullshit put you down. It was unprofessional. I admit it. But that wasn't the big thing. That was:

"We have our feet on the ground here. We are fabricantes. We work. We are ordinary guys!"

Maybe it didn't sound so strange, but there was something about those words, and I started wondering: Why is Guardiola telling me those things? Does he think I'm so different? I couldn't put my finger on it at first. But it didn't feel so good. Sometimes it was like in the youth team in MFF. Did I once again have a coach who thought I came from the wrong neighbourhood? Still, I hadn't done anything, I hadn't head-butted a teammate, no stealing bikes, nothing. I had never been such a pussy my whole life. I was the opposite of what the papers were writing. I was the guy who stepped around on his toes and thought about everything before doing anything. The old wild Zlatan was gone! Lots of stuff was gone! I ended up in my own shadow.

It had never happened before, and so far it wasn't a big deal. It'll work out, I thought, I'll be myself soon again. I'll get going, and maybe I'm just imagining things, having fantasies. Guardiola wasn't unpleasant, not at all. He seemed to believe in me. He saw me scoring goal after goal and how much I meant to the team, but still... that feeling didn't disappear. Did he think I was that different?

"We keep our feet on the ground here!"

Did Guardiola mean I was the guy who didn't? I didn't get it and I tried to shake it off me. Saying: Focus instead! Just forget about it! But the vibes were still there, and I wondered more and more: Should everyone be the same in this club? It didn't feel healthy. No one's the same. People try sometimes, sure. But then they strangle themselves, and ruin things for the team. Absolutely, Guardiola had been a huge success. The club had won a lot under him. I have to applaud that, and a victory is a victory.

But now afterwards I think it came at a price. The price was that the big personalities were chased away. It wasn't a coincidence that the guy had problems with guys like Ronaldhino, Deco, Eto'o, Henry and me. We're no "ordinary boys". We have threatened him and then he tries to chase us away, it's not more complicated than that, and I hate stuff like that. If you're no "ordinary boy", you shouldn't be forced into becoming one. No one gains from that. Fuck, if I had tried becoming like the guys in MFF I wouldn't be where I am today. Listen, don't listen, is the foundation of my success.

That doesn't work for everyone. But it works for me, and Guardiola didn't understand shit about that. He thought he could change me. In his Barca everyone should be like Xavi, Iniesta and Messi. I have nothing bad to say about them, like I said, not at all, on the contrary. It was amazing being on the same team as them. Good players trigger me and I was watching them like I've always watched great talents: Can I learn something? Can I work a little harder?

But look at their backgrounds. Xavi came to Barca when he was eleven years old. Iniesta was twelve, Messi thirteen. They were shaped by the club. They didn't know anything else and I'm sure that was good for them. It was their thing, but it wasn't mine. I came from the outside, I came with all my personality, and there wasn't room for it, not in Guardiola's little world. But like I said, I just had a sense of these things back in November. At that point the problems were simpler:

Would I play and would I do it well after my break?

The pressure on us was incredible ahead of the El Clasico at Camp Nou. Back then the Chilean Manuel Pellegrini was coach of Real. There were speculations that he would get fired if Real didn't win. They were talking about me, Kaka, Cristiano, Messi, Pellegrini and Guardiola. It was a lot of "that guy against

that guy". The city was boiling of all expectations, and I came to the stadium in the club Audi and walked into the locker room. Guardiola would start with Thierry Henry on top and Messi to the right and Iniesta to the left. It was dark outside then. The stadium was lit up and the cameras were flashing everywhere.

You could feel it immediately, Real were more triggered. They created more chances, and in the 20th minute Kaka dribbled beautifully and quickly and passed a clear Cristiano. He had a great chance, but blew it. Victor Valdés, our goalie, saved it with his foot, and only a minute later Higuain in Real was making his way through. It was close, close. There were many chances and we played to stagnant, didn't move enough and had problems with the passes. The nervousness spread in the team and our fans started booing, especially at Casillas in Real's goal. He was delaying the game and his goal kicks. But Real continued dominating and we were lucky having 0-0 after 45 minutes.

In the beginning of the second half Guardiola asked me to start warming, and that was a great feeling, I have to say. The crowd was screaming and cheering. The thunder from the stands filled me, and I applauded them back as a thank you, and in the 51st minute Thierry Henry went off and I came in, and I was hungry. I hadn't been gone for long. But it felt like it, maybe because I had missed a group game in the Champions League against my old team Inter. But now I was back and only a few minutes had passed when the Brazilian, Daniel Alves, got the ball on the right side. Alves reads the game quickly and the attack was fast. There was a bit of a commotion in the Real defence, and in situations like that, I don't think. I just run into the box, and then the cross ball came, a long pass. I blasted forward.

I was clear in front of the goal and shot a volley with my left foot, bang, boom, goal, and the stadium woke up like a vulcano, and I felt in my body, nothing can stop me now. We won 1-0. I was the man of the match, and was praised everywhere. At that moment no one questioned my price of almost 70 million. I was on fire.

Then Christmas break came. We went to Åre [ed note: ski resort, northern Sweden] and I drove snowmobiles, like I told you, and had a great time. But that was also the turning point. After New Years the things that had been tough during fall became much worse and I wasn't myself anymore. That's what it felt like. I had become another, much more insecure Zlatan, and everytime Mino had had meetings with the Barca management I asked him:

"What do they think of me?"

"They think you're the best forward in the world."

"I mean privately, as a person."

I had never cared about that before. I used to not give a shit. I wanted to play well. And then people could say what they want. But now all of a sudden it was important, and that showed that I wasn't feeling well. My confidence went away and I felt inhibited. I barely cheered when I scored anymore. I didn't dare getting angry, and that's no good, not at all. I locked things up inside of me, and then I'm really not sensitive to stuff. I'm tough. I've experienced a lot. But still, day after day getting those looks and comments about me not fitting in or being different, that tears you apart. It was like having been thrown back in time, to the years before my career took off. A lot of it could barely be talked about, it was small stuff, a glance, some comments, the tone of voice, stuff I had never cared about before. I was used to some tough lingo and language. I'm grown up with that. But now I got that feeling: Am I like the foster kid in this family, the guy who doesn't belong? How sick wasn't that?

When I for the first time tried to fit in and really adjust, I was ignored, and like if that wasn't enough, then came this thing with Messi. You remember it from the first chapter. Messi was the big star. And in a way the team was his. The guy was shy, and sure, I liked him. But now I had come and dominated on the field and caused a huge commotion.

It must have been a bit like I had knocked on the door of his house and went in and lay down in his bed. He explained to Guardiola that he didn't want play out wide, to the right, anymore. He wanted to play in the middle, and I was locked up and didn't receive many balls anymore, and the situation flipped up-side-down from the fall. Now I wasn't the one scoring anymore, Messi was, and I had that talk with Guardiola. The club management had pressured me a bit:

"Talk to him! Work things out!"

But how did that work? That was the beginning of the war, the freezing me out thing. He stopped talking to me. He stopped looking at me. He said good morning to everyone else. To me he said nothing. And that was very unpleasant, I'm sorry but it was. I would like to have said: I didn't care. Why should I care about some guy doing some bullying shit? Normally I would have done that of course. But I wasn't very strong at that point.

The whole situation broke me down and that wasn't easy. Having a boss with that kind of power over you who consciously ignored you, it'll crawl up under your skin eventually, and now I wasn't the only one seeing this. Others did too, and they were wondering: What's happening? What's going on? They told me: "You have to talk to him. This won't work."

But no, I had done enough talking with that guy. I wasn't gonna crawl, so I held it together, and started playing well again despite my position on the field and the atmosphere in the club. I came into a turn when I scored five, six goals. But Guardiola was as ice cold anyway, and that wasn't strange, I understand that now.

It was never, ever about my game. It was my personality, and night and day my mind was buzzing: Is it something I said or done? Do I look weird? I went through everything, every little meeting and event. I found nothing. I had been quiet, a perfect bore. But still I went on: Is it this or is it that? So no, I didn't just react with anger.

Just as much I was looking at the faults with me. I thought about it all the time. But the guy wouldn't give up and that wasn't just shit. It was unprofessional. The whole team was affected the management became more and more nervous. Guardiola was fucking up the biggest investment the club had ever made and important games were waiting in the Champions League. We were playing Arsenal away, and the status quo between me and the coach continued and I'm sure he would have liked to leave me at home, but he didn't dare going that far. And I started with Messi on top.

But did he give me any instructions? None! Nothing! I just had to play on my own. It was the Emirates Stadium. It was huge, and as always in England all media were against me, and there was all that talk: he doesn't score against English teams. I held a press conference. I tried being myself after all. I said like "Wait and see". "I will show you."

But it wasn't easy, not with that coach, and I stepped out on the field, and it was a difficult start. The tempo was high and Guardiola disappeared from my mind. It was almost like magic. I have played few games so well I think. But sure, I missed some chances. I shot straight at Arsenal's keeper, or outside. I should have scored, but nothing came out of it and at half time it was 0-0.

Guardiola will put me on the bench, I thought. But he let me continue, and the second half had barely begun before I got a long ball from Piqué and I ran deep, I had a defender next to me and the goalie ran towards me and the ball bounced, and I chipped it. I chipped the ball over him and in the goal. It was 1-0, and only ten minutes later I received a beautiful pass from Xavi and I ran like an arrow. But now I didn't chip it. I went full force. I smashed it in with power. 2-0 and the game seemed to be over. But what did Guardiola do? Did he applaud? He substituted me! Smart move! After that the team fell a part and Arsenal managed to equalize. 2-2.

I hadn't felt anything during the game. But afterwards I had some pain in a calf, and it got worse, and it was shit. I had found form again. But now I would miss the return game against Arsenal and the second El Clasico, and I didn't get any support from Guardiola. There were even more mind games. If I came into a room, he would leave. He didn't even want to be near me, and now afterwards when I think about it, it feels insane.

No one knew what was going on, not the management, not the players, no one. But it's strange with that man. Like I said, I don't want to take his success away from him, or say that he's not a good coach in other ways. But he must have some serious problems. He can't handle guys like me. Maybe it's because he's afraid of losing his authority. Probably not an unusual thing, right? Bosses who have some qualities

but can't handle strong personalities, and don't see any other way than freezing them out. Coward bosses in other words!

Anyway, he didn't ask me about my injury. He didn't dare. Or, well, he talked to me about it before the semifinal in Champions League away against Inter. But then he was acting weird, and it fucked up, like I said before. Mourinho was right. We didn't win the Champions, he did, and after that Guardiola treated me like it had been my fault, and the explosion was in the air, waiting to happen.

It was scary in some ways, and that feeling that everything you had inside of you needed to get out and I was glad I had Thierry Henry. He understood me, and we were having laughs, like I said. That eased the pressure, and somehow I started not caring about the whole thing. What else could I do? For the first time football didn't feel that important. I spent more time with Maxi and Vincent and Helena and I came much closer to them during this time. I'm grateful for that. The kids mean everything. That's the truth.

But still, I couldn't ignore the atmosphere in the club totally and the outburst that had been building up for some time really came eventually. In the locker room after the game against Villareal I screamed at Guardiola. I screamed about his balls and how he shit himself all over in front of Mourinho, and you can imagine. It became a war and we were two people. He the little scared philosopher who didn't dare looking me in the eyes, or even saying good morning, and then me, who had been quiet and careful for a long time, but now finally had become myself again.

It wasn't a game. In another situation with a different person it wouldn't have been a big deal. Raging like that isn't a big deal for me, not giving them and not receiving them. I grew up like that. It's routine for me, and often stuff like that is good. It clears the air. Viera and me had become friends after a huge fight. But with Pep... you noticed it right away.

He couldn't handle it. He avoided me completely and often during nights I'd be lying awake thinking about everything: What's the next step? What should I do? One thing was for sure: it was like back in MFF's youth team. I was viewed as different. So I had to become an even better player. I had to become so fucking good not even Guardiola could place me on the bench. But I wasn't going to pretend being someone else anymore, not a fucking chance. Fuck: Here we are like this and do it like that. Here we are normal boys. More and more I understood how immature that was. A real coach can handle different personalities. It's part of his job. A team benefits from different kinds of guys. Some are a bit tougher. Some are like Maxwell, or like Messi and the gang.

But Guardiola couldn't handle it, and because of that he wanted revenge. I could feel it. It was in the air, and that it would cost the club tens of millions of euros didn't matter to him. We were going to play the last game of the league. He put me on the bench. I didn't expect anything else. But now all of a sudden he wanted to talk to me. He called me into his office at the stadium. It was in the morning, and in there he had match jerseys, pictures of himself and stuff like that. The atmosphere was ice cold. We hadn't talked at all since my outburst. But he was nervous. His eyes were wandering around.

That guy is not a born authority, no real charisma. If you didn't know he was the coach of a great team, you wouldn't notice him entering a room, and now he sat there crumbling. I'm sure he was waiting for me to say something. I didn't say a word. I waited.

"So, well...", he began.

He didn't look me in the eyes.

"I don't know what I want from you next season."

"Okay."

"It's up to you and Mino what happens. I mean, you are Ibrahimovic. You're not a guy who plays every third game, right?"

He wanted me to answer. But I'm not stupid. I know very well: he who speaks the most in situations like that, he loses. So I kept quiet. Didn't change my face. I sat still. But of course I knew: he had a message, what it wasn't quite clear. But it sounded like he wanted to get rid of me and that wasn't some minor thing. I was the biggest investment the club had ever made. So I sat quiet. I did nothing. So he repeated himself:

"I don't know what I want from you. What do you say about that? What's your comment?"

I didn't have any comments.

"Is that all?" I just replied.

"Yes, but..."

"OK, thanks", I said and left.

I guess I appeared tough and cool. At least that was what I wanted. But I was boiling inside, and when I came out I called Mino.







## CHAPTER 25

Sometimes I go on to hard. I don't know. It was a thing with me from the start. My dad raged like a bear when he drank, and everyone in the family got scared or got out of there. But I stepped up to him, man against man, and I shouted things like: "You have to stop drinking!" it made him furious. "Damn it, this is my house. I do as I please. I'll throw you out!"

It could become really chaotic. The whole apartment rumbled. We never got in a fist fight. He had a big heart. But honestly, I was ready for a fight.

I was ready for anything, and sometimes, I understood that it was pointless. It would just lead to confrontation and anger. We wouldn't take one step forward. Despite that I just went on. I took the fights, and don't think that I'm trying to brag about being the tough one in the family. I'm just saying how it was.

I had that character early. I stepped up. I didn't run, and it wasn't just when it came to dad. It was everywhere. My whole childhood was full of tough guys that raged like lightning: my mom, the sisters, the guys on the blocks, and since then I have it in me, that carefulness: What's happening? Who wants to fight? The body is always up for a fight.

That was the way that I chose. Other in the family took other roles. You went to Sanela with your feelings. I was the fighter. I someone fucked with me, if fucked back. I was my way of surviving, and I taught myself to not keep in it. I said it right out, there was no "You're very good, you're very nice, but..." it was straight on: "You got to get a grip of yourself." Then I took the consequences for it. It was just like that. It was my childhood, and of course, I had changed a lot when I came to Barcelona. I had met Helena and got children and calmed down, and, like, said "Be kind and pass the butter". But a lot of it was still in me. I clenched my fists those days in the club and prepared to stand for what I believed in. It was early summer 2010. There was going to be a WC in South Africa, and in Barca Joan Laporta resigned.

A new president was going to be elected, and stuff like that always creates turbulence. People get insecure. I guy named Sandro Rosell was chosen. Rosell had been vice president until 2005 and friends with Laporta. But something had happened. They were now enemies, it was said. So of course, people were worried. Would Rosell clean out the old gang? No one knew. The sporting director Txiki Begiristain resigned before Rosell could fire him, and I wondered of course: What would this mean in my conflict?

It was Laporta who had bought me for record sums and it wasn't a unreasonable thought that Rosell would want to get one over him by showing that the investment was idiotic. A lot of newspapers also wrote that Rosell's first mission was to sell me. The journalists had no real clue about what had happened between me and Guardiola, and neither did I in a way. But they knew that something was wrong, and honestly, you don't have to be a football expert to understand. I was unhappy and didn't react the way I used to on the pitch. Guardiola had damaged me, and I remember that Mino called the new president. He told him what Guardiola had said on that meeting.

"What the hell did the guy mean?" he asked. "Is he trying to get rid of Zlatan?"

"No, no", Rosell answered. "Guardiola believes in him."

"But why does he say that then?"

Rosell couldn't answer. He was new and nobody seemed to know. The situation was insecure. We won the league and the vacation came. It was a long time ago I needed it so much. I needed to get away, and I and Helena travelled around: L.A., Vegas, everywhere, and during that time the WC was being played. I barely watched. I was too disappointed. Sweden wasn't there, and honestly, I didn't want to think about football at all. I tried to repress the mess in Barca. But that didn't work for so long. The days were counting down. I had to be back soon, and as little as I wanted, all the questions came back. What's going to happen? What should I do? I thought about it a lot, I knew, there was an obvious solution. I could get myself sold. But I didn't want to give up my dream so easily. No way! I decided to work like an animal in training and become better than ever.

No one was going to break me. I was going to show them all. But what do you think happened? I didn't have the time to show a thing. I hadn't even put my football shoes on before Guardiola called me in again.



It was the nineteenth of July, I think. Most of the player hadn't come back from the WC yet. It was calm around us, and Pep tried some small talk. He had obviously an errand. He was nervous and uncomfortable. Despite that was trying to be polite, I guess, for the sake of it.

"How has the vacation been?"

"Good, good!"

"And how do you feel before the new season?"

"Also good. I'm pumped. I'll give everything."

"You..."

"Yes."

"You'll have to prepare yourself to sit on the bench", he said, and as I said before, this was the first day. The pre season had not begun yet. Guardiola hadn't seen me play yet, not even one minute. The words couldn't be interpreted as anything other than a personal attack.

"Alright", I just answered. "I understand."

"And as you know we have bought David Villa from Valencia."

David Villa was hot, no doubt about that. He was one of the stars in the Spanish National team who by them was on their way to win the WC, but still, he was a winger. I played in the middle. He had nothing to do with me, not really.

"And what to you say about that?" he continued.

Nothing, I thought first, more than like congratulations. But then it hit me: why not test Guardiola? Why not check if this has anything remotely to do with football, or if this is only about kicking me out of the club?

"What do I think about that?" I said.

"Yes."

"Well, that I'm going to work harder. I will really, really go for a spot in the team. I will convince you that I'm good enough", and honestly, I didn't think it was true.

I had never sucked up to a coach like that. My philosophy was to let my game do the talking. It's just silly to go around and talk about giving everything you got. You get paid to give everything you got. But this was my way of trying to understand. I wanted to hear what he answered. If he said: Alright, then we'll have to see if you can take a sport, it would mean something. But now he just looked at me.

"I know that. But how can we proceed?"

It was silly, and I guessed that he wanted me to flip out and shout: I won't accept this. I'm leaving the club! Then he could easily say: Zlatan wanted to get out himself, it's not my decision. But I may be a savage, and guy that makes the confrontation too often. But I also know when to control myself. I had nothing to gain by declaring myself for sale, so I calmly thanked for the talk and got out of there.

I was of course furious. I was boiling. But the meeting had still given me something. I had understood the seriousness: he wasn't going to let me if even if I learned how to fly through the air, and the question really was now: would I be able to put up with it, and go to training everyday and have this guy standing in front of me? I doubted it. Maybe I must change tactics. I thought about it. I thought about it all the time.

We went to South Korea and China for pre season training, and over there I got to play some games. It didn't mean a thing. The most important player had not come from the WC yet. I was still the black sheep, and Guardiola stayed away. If he wanted something he sent other to talk with me and during the whole time the media were like crazy. It had been going on all summer: What will happen with Zlatan? Is he going to be sold? Will he stay? They were on me all the time, and it was the same for Guardiola. He got questions about it all the time, and how do you think he answered? Nice and clean: I don't like Zlatan, I want to get him sold? Not really. He looked uncomfortable, and talked his nonsense.

"Zlatan decides his own future."

Shit like that, and it started ticking in me. I felt pointed out and pissed. I wanted to do something explosive. But also, how should I say, something got me going. I understood: the situation had gone into a new stage. It wasn't only war not. The fight on the transfer market had started now and I like that game, at my side I have the guy who's best in the world at it – Mino. He and I talked all the time and we decided to play rough and tough: Guardiola didn't deserve anything else.

In South Korea I had a meeting with Josep Maria Bartomeu, the new vice president in the club. We sat at the hotel and talked, and that guy was at least clear.

"Zlatan, if you have any offers, consider them", he said.

"I'm not going anywhere", I answered. "I'm a Barcelona player. I stay in Barca."

Josep Maria Bartomeu looked surprised.

"But how should we solve this?"

"I have an idea", I answered.

"You have?"

"You can call Real Madrid."

"Why would we call them?"

"Because if I really have to leave Barca, I want to go to Real. You can make the deal happen."

Josep Maria Bartomeu got terrified.

"You're kidding", he said.

I looked dead serious.

"Not at all. We have a problem." I continued. "We have a coach who's not man enough to say that he doesn't want me here. I want to stay. But if he wants to sell me he has to say it himself, clear and distinctly. And the only club I want to go to is Real, just so you know."

I left the room, and now it was definite. The game was on. I had said Real. But of course, it was just a move, and provocation, a strategically trick. In reality we had Manchester City and Milan as options.

Sure, I knew about the incredible things that had happened in City and all the money that was there since the gang from the United Arab Emirates had taken over. City could very well become a top club in a few years. But I was soon to be twenty nine. I didn't have time for plans in the long run, and money was never to most important. I wanted to go to a team that's good now and no club in Europe had to history of Milan.

"We go for Milan", I said.

When I afterwards think about it it's incredible. From the day Guardiola had called me in and said that I was going to sit on the bench we played a tough game, and we noticed of course: we were stressing Guardiola and the management. It was the plan. The guys were going to get so psyched that it would make them let me go for cheap. And that would help me get a new contract! We had a meeting with Sandro Rosell, the new president, and you could notice afterwards. Sandro Rosell was in a fox trap.

He didn't either get what the problem was between me and Guardiola. He had just understood that the situation was unsustainable and that he had to sell me to any price, if he wasn't going to sack the coach. But he couldn't do that. Not after all the success the club had. Rosell had no choice. Didn't matter if he loved or hated me, he had to get rid of me.

"I'm sorry for this", he said. "But it is what it is. Do you have any club that you want to go to?" Mino and I didn't the same thing as with Bartomeu

"Yes, actually", I said. "There's one."

"Good, very good." He lit up. "Which club?"

"Real Madrid."

He got pale. To let a Barca star go to Real is like high treason.

"Not possible", he answered. "Anything but that."

He was shaken up and now both I and Mino felt it: Now we play our game, and I continued calmly: "But you asked and I answered, and I'll say it gladly again: Real Madrid is the only club I can think of. I like Mourinho. But then you have to call and tell it to Real yourselves. Is that alright?"

It wasn't alright. Nothing in the world was less alright, and we knew that of course, and Sandro Rosell started to panic now. The club had bought me for seven hundred millions. The guy had all the pressure on him to get the money back, but he sold me to Real, that was the new club of Mourinho, Rosell would almost get shot by the fans.

It wasn't easy for him, you can say that. He couldn't keep me because of the coach. He couldn't sell me to the arch enemy. The guy had lost the initiative, and we continued hard:

"But think about how smooth it will be. Mourinho have said it himself that he wants me!"

We didn't know anything about that. But we pretended.

"No", he said.

"That's bad. Really! Real is the only club we can think about."

We went out and smiled. Real, Real we had kept saying. It was our official line. But we were in talks with Milan, and we were working for them. If Rosell was desperate it wasn't really good for Barca. But it was good for Milan. The more Rosell had to sell, the cheaper it would be to buy me, and that was good for us. It was a game, and it went on, on different levels, one for the outside, and one behind the scenes. But the clock was also ticking.

The transfer window was closing at the thirty first of August, and the twenty seventh we were going to play a friend against Milan at Camp Nou. Nothing was done yet. But the thing was in the media. There was speculations everywhere, and Galliani, the vice president of Milan, declared solemnly that he wouldn't leave Barcelona without Ibrahimovic.

At the arena the supporters were showing banners with: "Stay Ibra!" There was a lot of focus on me of course. But it was mostly Ronaldinho's game. Ronaldinho is a god in Barcelona. He played in Milan, but he had been in Barca and then been chosen as the best player in the world two years in a row. Before the game we would get to see his best stuff on a big screen at the arena, and he was going to run a honorary lap around the stadium. But that guy... he does as he wishes.

We sat in the locker room and waited to get into the arena. It felt weird. Outside we could hear the roar from the crowd. Guardiola didn't look at me of course, and I wondered: Is this my last game with the team? What will happen? I had no clue. Then everybody jumped. Ronaldinho looked in through the door, and Ronaldinho, he shines. He is one of the greatest. Everyone was looking at him.

"Ibra", he shouted and smiled.

"Yes", I answered.

"Have you packed your bags? I'm here to take you with me to Milano!" he continued, and everyone started laughing, so typical of Ronaldinho you know, to just get in there to us, and people were watching me.

I kind of knew already of course. But no one had heard about it like that before. Now it was repeated over and over again. I got to play from the start. The game didn't mean anything really, and just before kick off me and Ronaldinho continued to joke around about it: Like, are you crazy? The pictures of us, laughing on the pitch were shown everywhere later. But it was the craziest in the player tunnel before the second half. Then all the bigger names shouted at me, Pirlo, Gattuso, Nesta and Ambrosini:

"You have to come Ibra! We need you!"

Milan hadn't had an easy time lately. Inter had dominated the Italian league, and everyone in Milan were longing of course for the great times again, and I know now afterwards that many of the players, especially Gattuso, had pressured the management:

"For fuck sake, buy Ibra. We need a real winner in the team."

But it wasn't so easy. Milan didn't have as much money as before, and as desperate as Sandro Rosell was he tried to the end to get as much as he could for me. He wanted fifty, forty million Euros for me. But Mino continued to play tough.

"You're not getting shit. Ibra will go to Real. We don't want to go to Milan."

"What about thirty they?"

The clock was ticking and Rosell went down in price time after time. It felt very promising, and Galliani came and visited me and Helena at our house in the mountains. Galliani is a real heavy weight and an old friend and business partner to Berlusconi. He's a bastard when it comes to negotiations. I had dealt with him earlier. It was when I was leaving Juventus, and that time he had said: "I offer you this, or nothing!" Juventus was in a crisis then, and he had the upper hand.

The situation was the other way around now. He had the pressure on him. He couldn't come home without me, not after the promises he had made and the pressure from the players and the fans. Besides we had helped him. We had gotten the price down. He was getting me on the cheap.

"This is my terms", I said. "It's this, or nothing", and I saw how he was thinking and sweating.

The terms weren't so bad.

"Alright", he said.

"Alrigh."

We shook hands and afterwards the negotiations about my price continued. It was between the club and I didn't care, not really. But it was a drama and many things were involved. The time was one of them. The concern of the seller was another. The fact that the coach couldn't handle me was the third. For every hour that went Rosell got more nervous, and my price went down and down. Eventually I was sold for twenty million Euros. Twenty million! Just because of one person my price had fell down with fifty millions.

Because of Guardiola's problems the club was forced to make a catastrophic deal, it was sick, and I told all that to Rosell. Not because I needed to. He knew it. He had probably been awake at nights swearing at it. I mean: I had mad twenty two goals and fifteen assists during my season in Barcelona. Despite that I had almost dropped seventy per cent in value. Whose fault was that? Sandro Rosell knew very well, and I remember how we all stood there, him, Mino, I, Galliani, my lawyer and Josep Maria Bartomey in the office at Camp Nou. Before us was the contract. I just had to sign it and say good bye.

"I want you to know..." Rosell started.

"Yes?"

"That I'm doing the worst piece of business in my whole life", he continued. "I'm giving you away for free, Ibra."

"You can see what bad leadership can cost."

"I know that this has been dealt with badly", he said and I signed.

Then it was my turn. I held that pen and everyone was looking at me and I felt, it was time to say something. Or I don't really know if it was the time for it. Maybe I should have been quiet. But I wanted to get some things out in the air.

"I have a message to Guardiola", I started, and everyone got nervous of course. What's happening now? Haven't it been enough of trouble already? Can't the guy just sign?

"Do you really have to?"

"Yes. I want you to tell him...", and then I said exactly what I wanted them to tell Guardiola from me.

Everyone in the room must have thought, why does he come with this stuff now? But trust me, I needed it. Something happened in my head at that moment. I got my motivation back. Just the thought of getting even lit me up, it's the truth.

When I signed that paper and said those words, I became myself again. I was woken up from a bad dream and for the first time in a long time I wanted to play football. All the thoughts about retiring were gone and afterward I entered a period when I played out of pure joy. Or, I played out of pure joy and anger, joy because of getting out of Barca and anger because one single person had crushed my dream.

I was like I had been exempted, and I started to look at the situation in a different way. When I was in the middle of it I had mostly tried to cheer myself up: it's not that bad, I'll come back, I'll show them. I did like this all the time. But then, when it finally was over I realised. It had been tough. The one person who should mean the most to me had completely frozen me out, and that was worse than most things I had been through. I've had terrible pressure on me and in times like that you need your coach.

But what did I have? A guy that avoided me. A guy that tried to treat me like I wasn't there. I was supposed to be one of the stars there. But in reality I had walked around down there and felt unwelcomed. The hell, I have had Mourinho and Capello, two of the most disciplined coaches in the world and I had never had any problems with them. But then that Guardiola came along... I was boiling when I thought about it, and I don't forget when I told Mino:

"He screwed up everything."

"Zlatan", he answered.

"Yes."

"Dreams can come true, and make you happy."

"Yeah."

"But dreams can also come true and kill you", and it was true, I felt that right away.

A dream had come true and been crushed in Barca, and I continued down the stairs to the journalists that waited out there, and then I thought: I didn't want to call the guy by his real name. I needed something else, and I remember all the nonsense he had said, and then suddenly outside Camp Nou, I thought of it. The Philosopher!

I was going to call him the Philosopher.

"Ask the Philosopher what the problem is", I said with all the pride and anger that I felt.

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## CHAPTER 26

The attention was insane, and I remember one thing Maxi said afterwards, or two things actually. The first one was just funny. He asked: "Why is everyone looking at you, daddy?" and I tried explaining to him: "Daddy plays football. People watch me on TV and they think I'm very good", and after that I felt proud: daddy isn't too bad. Then it took a new turn. It was our nanny who told me.

Maxi had asked why everyone was looking at HIM, because of course, that was something he'd felt those days, especially when he arrived with me to Milan, and worst of all, he had added: "I don't like that they're looking at me like that." I'm sensitive about those things. Is he also gonna start feeling he's different now? I hate it when kids feel pointed at or out of place, also because so much of my own childhood comes back: Zlatan doesn't belong here. He's like that. He's like this.

Those things were going through my head, and I tried being as much as possible with Maxi and Vincent during that time. They are wonderful, wild guys. But it wasn't easy. The chaos had erupted. After I had talked to the journalists outside the Camp Nou I went home to Helena.

She hadn't planned on moving again so quickly, she would probably have liked to stay. But she knew it better than anyone: if I'm not comfortable on the football field, I'm like a faded flower. And that affects the whole family and I told Galliani: I want to go to Milano with the whole gang, Helena, the boys, the dog and Mino. Galliani nodded, si, si. Come on, all of you! Apparently he had planned something special, and we jumped on one of the club's private jets and left Barcelona. I remember landing at Linate in Milan. It was like Obama was coming. There were eight black Audis lined up by the runway and a red carpet was rolled out, and I stepped out with Vincent in my arms.

I was interviewed by a few selected reporters for a few minutes, guys from the Milan Channel and Sky, and hundreds of fans were screaming from the other side of the fence. It was big. You could feel it in the air. The club had waited a long time for this. Five years ago, when Berlusconi had had reserved a table for us at the restaurant Giannino they had thought it was a done deal and had made all sorts of preparations; one thing was something for their website, like a cool effect, first the page was black, and then came something like lightning in the middle, and boom, boom, like a sound effect, right before my name appeared, Ibrahimovic, like a flashing, booming banner, and the words "Finally ours".

It was cool and now they did that thing, and no one had expected the reactions. The site crashed. It went black, and I remember walking by that fence at the airport where all the fans screamed my name, "Ibra, Ibra".

Then I jumped into one of the Audi cars, and we went through the city. It was chaos. I'm telling you. Zlatan had landed. There were cars and motorbikes and TV-cameras following us, and of course, I got a kick out of that. The adrenaline was pumping, and I realized more and more what kind of black hole I had

been living in at Barca. It was like I had been locked up in prison and was greeted by a party outside the walls when I came out, and everywhere I felt the same thing: all of Milan had been waiting for me and everyone wanted me to take responsibility. I was expected to bring back the trophies, and I liked, to tell you the truth.

The street outside the Hotel Boscolo where we were going to stay had been closed by police. Outside people were screaming and waving, and inside the hotel, the entire hotel staff was lined, bowing. In Italy football players are like gods, and we got the big suite, and we noticed it immediately. Everything was so well organized. This club had power and tradition, and honestly, I was jumping inside of me. I wanted to play football. The same day Milan were playing Lecce in the first game of the season and I told Galliani I wanted to play. But that wasn't possible. My papers weren't ready. But still, I went to the stadium. I was to be presented at half time, and I'll never forget that feeling. I didn't want to go into the locker room. I didn't want to mess with the team's preparations. But nearby was a lounge and I sat there with Galliani and Berlusconi and some other hotshots.

"You remind me of a player I once had", Berlusconi said.

Of course I sensed who he was talking about, but I wanted to be polite.

"Who?" I said.

"A guy who could take care of things on his own."

It was Van Basten he was talking about and he welcomed me to the club: "It's a great honour", and all that stuff, and then we went up to the stands together. I was sitting two seats away from him because of some political reason. There's always a lot going on with that man. But still it was quite peaceful and calm, at least considering what would happen next. Two months later the big circus around Berlusconi with rumours about young girls and trials exploded. But then he was sitting there looking satisfied, and I started to feel the vibes. People were screaming my name again, and I walked down out on the field, and down there they rolled out a long red carpet and put up a little stage, and I was waiting by the sideline for a long time, at least it felt like that. The stadium was boiling. San Siro was sold out, although it was August and vacation time, and I stepped out. There was like thunder around me, and I became a little boy again. It hadn't been long since I stood at Camp Nou in a similar situation, and I walked out with all the screaming and applauding and along the carpet a lot of kids were standing. I hi-fived all of them and walked up on the stage.

"Now we're going to win everything", I said in Italian and then things got worse.

The stadium was shaking and I was given a match jersey. It said Ibrahimovic, but didn't have a number. I didn't have one yet. I had been given a few to choose between, but none of them were good, and maybe I could have eleven, like Klaas-Jan Huntelaar now had. Huntelaar was on the transfer list but I had to wait since he hadn't been sold yet. In any case, now it would begin. I was supposed to make sure Milan won their first Scudetto in seven years.

A new golden era would begin, I had promised that.

Both me and Helena got bodyguards and maybe someone thinks: what kind of luxury is that? It's not a luxury. There's chaos around football players in Italy, there's a tremendous pressure, and honestly, some creepy things had happened, not just the fire outside our door in Turin. When I was in Inter and was playing a game at San Siro, we had Sanela here visiting. She and Helena drove out there in our new big Mercedes. There was chaos and traffic outside the stadium. Helena had to go very slowly and people around her had plenty of time looking in and seeing who she was. A guy on a vespa went by a bit too fast and a bit too close and smashed the rearview mirror.

At that point Helena didn't know if it was deliberately or not. It was more like: Oh no, what's he doing? She pulled down the window to try and fix the mirror and saw something from the side: a new guy wearing a helmet came rushing towards her, and then she knew: something was fishy, it's a trap. She tried pulling up the window but the car was new and she didn't find the right button so she weren't able to close the window in time. The guy came up and hit her in the face.

There was a big fight and her car smashed into the car in front and they guy tried pulling her out of the window. But thank god Sanela was there. She grabbed on to Helena's body and held her back, it was

insane. A fight over life and death, that's what it felt like, and finally Sanela managed to pull Helena back into the car and Helena turned around somehow.

She delivered a kick in the middle of the guy's face from an impossible angle, and she had like eleven centimeter heels. That must have hurt pretty badly, and the guy ran away. By then people had gathered around the car. It was complete chaos, and Helena was bruised and beaten.

It could have ended badly. But there have been a few of those things. That's the reality. We needed protection, and anyway, my bodyguard, a nice good guy, drove me out to Milanello, the club's training facility, the first day.

I was going through all the regular medical tests. Milanello is almost an hour outside Milan, and the fans were waiting outside the gates, and we drove in. I felt the weight of the traditions in Milan and I greeted all the legends of the team, Zambrotta, Nesta, Ambrosini, Gattuso, Pirlo, Abbiati, Seedorf, Inzaghi, and the young Brazilian, Pato, and the coach Allegri, who just had arrived from Cagliari and didn't have much experience but seemed good. Sometimes when you're new in a team you're questioned. There's a fight about your status, like: Do you think you're the star here? But here, I felt it immediately. They all had respect for me, and maybe I shouldn't say that. But many players told me afterwards: We lifted twenty percent when you came. You pulled us out of the shadow. Milan hadn't only had a tough time in the league during several years. The club hadn't even been the best in town.

Inter had dominated. Inter had dominated ever since I came to the club in 2006 with that attitude Capello had given me, which somewhere said: Training is just as important as playing games. You can't train softly and play games aggressively. You have to be at war at every moment. Otherwise I'll be coming after you, and I walked around trying to pep the guys and made jokes, what had been natural for me everywhere, except in Barcelona. In a way it reminded me of my first time in Inter. The guys were like saying: lead us, lead us, and I was thinking: Now the balance of power will shift again. I went to every practice full of force, and just like before Barcelona I was yelling at people. I made a fuss and was screaming. I made fools out of those who lost and people were telling me: What's happening? We haven't seen the guys tagged like this for ages.

There was another new guy on the team. His name was Robson de Souza. He was called Robinho. I had been involved in his transfer. Galliani had asked me already back in Barcelona: "What do you think about Robinho? Can you play with him?"

"He's a wonderful player, just bring him. The rest will work out."

The club paid eighteen million euros for him, and that was considered cheap, and Galliani got a lot of praise for that too. He had managed to buy both me and Robinho at sale price. Not too long ago Manchester City had paid way more than twice that for Robinho. But still the buy was a bit of a gamble. Robinho had been a wonder kid who had gone a bit wrong. No one is a bigger god than Pelé in Brazil, and he was bossing Santos' youth academy in the 90's, Santos which was Pelé's original club and had had a rough ride for many years. People were dreaming of him finding a new super talent, not that many believed it seriously. A new Pelé! A new Ronaldo, the kind of player that isn't born many times during a century. But already at the first practice Pelé stood there flabbergasted. He even blew the whistle, people say, and walked up to a poor and skinny guy on the field.

"I almost start crying", he said. "You remind me of myself."

That was Robinho, a guy who grew up and became the big star everyone had expected, at least for starters. He was sold to Real Madrid and later to Manchester City. But lately he had received some negative publicity. There had been a lot of drama around him. We became close in Milan. We were both guys who at grown up under difficult conditions, and there were similarities between our lives. We had both been criticized for dribbling too much, and I loved his technique. He was a bit too unfocused on the pitch, and was doing too many tricks on his side.

I was on him a lot about that. I was on everyone in the team, and I was full of energy a head of my first game against Cesena, away, and you can imagine the hype around me. The papers were writing page after page: now I would prove what I meant to my new club.

It was me, Pato and Ronaldhino on top, and that sounded heavy. Robinho started on the bench. But it was hopeless. I was trying too hard, just like during my first time in Ajax. I wanted too much. That's why it didn't work, and it was 2-0 to Cesena after the first half. To Cesena and we were Milan! It was crazy, and I was angry and furious on the pitch. But fuck, nothing worked. But still I fought like an animal and at the end we got a penalty. Maybe, maybe we could turn it around? I was taking it, and I walked up and hit the ball - in the post. We lost and how do you think I felt? I was doing a drug test after the game, and came into that room, so pissed off I broke a table, and the medical guy in there was terrified:

"Take it easy, take it easy."

"Listen", I said. "You don't tell me what to do. Otherwise you'll end up like that table."

That wasn't nice, and the guy was totally innocent. But I had gone into Milan with that attitude, and my eyes turned black when we lost. Then you should let me break things in peace. I was boiling with anger and I was just happy when the papers went after me the next day and gave me bad ratings. I deserved it and I clenched my fists. But still, it didn't loosen up in the next game either, and not in the next, although I scored my first goal away against Lazio, and it looked like we'd win. But in the final minute we let the equalizer in, and that time there were no drug tests.

I went straight into the locker room, and in there that big board where the coach writes his tactics, and I kicked it with full force. The board flew away like a rocket and touched a player.

"Don't play with fire. It's dangerous", I roared and then everyone became quiet and I think they all knew exactly what I meant: we should win, nothing else, and we shouldn't be fucking letting in goals during the last few minutes. We couldn't continue like this.

We only had five points after four games and Inter went to the top of the league, just like always, and I felt the pressure on my shoulders more and more. We were still staying at the Hotel Boscolo, and had started getting some routines. Helena who always had stayed out of the spotlight and public life did her first interview ever. It was for the magazine Elle, and it created quite a circus. Every little word about us would create headlines. I could say something pointless like: "I haven't been eating so much meatballs and macaroni since I met Helena." And the papers would write about Zlatan's big declaration of love for Helena, and I felt it more and more, I was changing. I had always gotten a kick from attention, but now I was becoming more private and drawn back.

I didn't like having too many people around me, and we lived more secluded. I stayed indoors, and after a couple of months we moved to an apartment in the middle of the city that the club had arranged for us. That was nice of course, but it didn't have our furniture and things, it was nice, but quite impersonal. In the mornings the bodyguard was waiting for me downstairs in the lobby and we drove out to Milanello, and I had breakfast before practice and lunch afterwards, and it was a lot of PR-stuff, photos to take and things like that, and as always in Italy I was away from my family a lot. We stayed at a hotel the nights before the away games and were locked up at Milanello before the home games, and that started to affect me.

I missed a lot at home, Vincent grew up, he was talking more and more. It was crazy really. Maxi and Vincent had moved around so much that they talked three languages fluently, Swedish, Italian and English.

Life came into a new phase, and I was often thinking: What will I do the day my career is over, and Helena begins her again? There were some thoughts like that. Sometimes I was looking forward to the time after football. Sometimes I wasn't.

But I wasn't less tagged because of that, and quite soon things started to work on the pitch. I decided seven, eight straight games, and the old hysteria woke up again. It was "Ibra, Ibra" everywhere. The papers made photo montages. It was me, and on top of me the whole team, like I was carrying Milan on my shoulders. It was that kind of talk. I was hotter than ever.

But I knew one thing better than most at this time: In football you can be a god one day, and not worth shit the next, and step by step we got closer to the most important game in the league that fall, the derby against Inter at San Siro, and there were no doubts about it, the Ultras would hate me. The pressure



would be even bigger. And I also got some problems with a guy in the team. His name was Oguchi Onyewu and he was American and as big as a house, and I told a friend in the team:  
"Something serious is about to happen. I can feel it."

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With Berlusconi, Galliani and Mino



Arriving at the airport in Milan



## CHAPTER 27

It was said that he was the kindest person in the world. Oguchi Onyewu resembles a heavy weight boxer. He was about two meters tall and weighed around a hundred kilo. Even to he didn't have a spot in the team he had been chosen as the best foreign player in the Belgian league and the best American player of the year. But he couldn't handle me. He wanted to get me.

"I'm not like the other defenders", he said.

"Alright, that's good!"

"I don't get psyched by your talk. By your mouth that's running all the time."

"What are you talking about?"

"You, I've seen you at the games, with your mind games all the time", he continued, and that bugged me.

Not only because I was tired of all the defenders who wanted to provoke all the time. I'm not the talking type. I get revenge on the pitch. I've heard so much shit during the years, fucking gipsy, stuff about my mom, all that. The worst thing is: I see you after the game! What the fuck is that? Are we going to meet at the parking lot or what? It's just silliness. I remember Giorgio Chiellini, a central defender in Juventus. We had played together, and later when I was in Inter we met on the pitch and then he was on me all the time: "Come on, it's not like before, isn't it?" He tried to provoke, and then he tackled me from behind. It's cowardly, you know. You don't see the guy come, and I went down and was in pain. I had a lot of pain. But I didn't say a thing. I don't do that in situations like that. I tackle instead. I go of like a bomb in the tackles. But that time I didn't get a chance, and then after the final whistle I went up to him and grabbed his head and dragged him like a bad dog, and then Chiellini got scared. I saw it in him.

"You wanted to fight. So why are you shitting yourself now?" I sputtered and went to the locker room.

Yeah, I give back with my body and not with words and I told that to Oguchi Onyewu. But he just kept on going and when I shouted: "That was not a free kick!" he hushed with his finger, like: See, you're just talking shit, and I thought: That's it, it's enough now.

"Watch yourself", I said.

He hushed again and then everything turned black. But I didn't say anything, not a word. That bastard will know how I speak in moments like this and the next time he got the ball I rushed towards him and jumped with my feet and studs in front of me, it's the worst type of tackle. But he saw me. He threw himself away and both of us fell on the grass, and at first I thought, damn, a miss. I'll get him next time. But when I was getting up and walking away I got a punch on my shoulder, and that wasn't a good idea, Oguchi Onyewu.

I head butted him, and then we got in a fight. I'm not talking about a little one either. We wanted to beat the shit out of each other. It was brutal and we were two guys over ninety kilo, and we were rolling around and used knees and fought, and of course, the whole team rushed towards us and tried to break us up. It wasn't easy, not at all. We were crazy and furious, absolutely, sure, I admit, you're supposed to have adrenalin on the pitch, you're supposed to fight. But this was over the limit. It was like life and death. But still the weirdest thing happened afterwards.

Oguchi Onyewu started to pray to God with tears in his eyes. He made the cross sign and I thought: What is this? Then I flipped out even more. It felt provoking, and in that moment Allegri, the coach, came forward: "Calm down, Ibra." It didn't help. I just picked him up and put him away and ran towards Onyewu again. But then I was stopped by my team mates, and that was probably good. This could have ended badly, and afterwards Allegri called the both of us in. We shook hands and apologized. But Oguchi was cold like a fish, and fine by me. If he's cold then I'll be cold back, no problem, and afterwards I was driven home. Then Galliani, the boss, called, and you have to know one thing, I don't like to blame others. It's not a manly thing to do. It's shit, especially in a team where you have a leading role.

"Listen", I told Galliani. "It has happened a bad thing in training. It was my fault and I take the responsibility. I want to apologize and you can give me any punishment you want."

"Ibra", he said. "This is Milan. We don't work like that. You have apologized. Now we look forward."

But it wasn't over, not yet. There had been some supporters around the ground and the thing was spread to the newspapers. No one knew about the background. But the fight got famous. It took ten people to

break us apart, it was said, and there were talks about bad atmosphere in the team and Ibra as a bad boy, and all those usual things. I didn't care about any of that. You just write what you want! But I felt, damn, pain in my chest, and we looked it up. I had a broken rib and you can't do much about broken ribs. The doctors just put bandage around me.

It wasn't exactly the best thing that could happen. The preparations for the derby against Inter had started. We had Pato and Inzaghi on the injury list and the newspapers wrote about it all the time, and a lot of it was about the duel about me and Materazzi. It was going to be hateful, it was written. Not just because Materazzi was a tough guy and we had been in fights before and played together. Materazzi had mocked me for that kiss on the Barca badge at Camp Nou. It was this and that. There were talks about everything, but one thing was sure: Materazzi was going to be tough against me because it was his job. It was important for the team to stop me and in situations like there's only one way to answer. You have to be tough back. Or else you'll lose the initiative and risk to get injured.

No supporters are worse than the Inter Ultras. They're not forgiving guys, believe me, and I was enemy number one. No one had forgotten about our fight from the Lazio game, and I knew of course, there was going to be boos and stuff like that. But damn, those things are a part of the game.

I wasn't really the first Inter player to sign for Milan. I was in good company, Ronaldo came to Milan in 2007 and then the Inter supporters handed out whistles to annoy him. The games between Inter and Milan, the Derby della Madonnina, always steer up emotions, and somewhere there's politics and shit involved as well. There an enormous rivalry.

It's like Real – Barca in Spain, and I remember the players on the pitch. You could see it in their eyes. This was big. This was important. We were at the top of the league and a win would mean a lot. Milan had not won a derby in years. Inter had also won the CL that year. Inter had dominated. But if... if we were going to win, there would be a shift of power in the air, and in the arena you could hear the roars and the loud music from the speakers. It was hate and party in the air at the same time and I wasn't really nervous.

I was just pumped. I was itching to get in and have a war. But of course, I knew, you can have all the adrenalin. But you can still fall out of the game, not get a shit done. You don't know, and I remember the match start so well and the roars in the San Siro. You never really get used to it. It's boiling around you, and almost at once Seedorf had a header just over the bar. The game was back and forth.

In the fifth minute I got a ball on the right side of the pitch. I dribbled and got into the box and I had Materazzi on me. Materazzi wanted to say right away: You're not getting away, just wait! But he made a mistake. He took me down and I fell on the grass, and of course I thought: Is it a penalty? Is it a penalty? It should be. But I didn't know. It was a big noise and all the Inter players waved their hands of course; like, hell no.

But the referee ran towards the penalty spot and I took a deep breath. I was the one who was going to take the penalty and can you imagine. My team was behind me and no one needed to doubt what they were thinking: Don't miss Ibra! For god's sake don't miss!

In front of me were the goal and the goal keeper and behind them the Inter Ultras. They were crazy. They were booing and shouting. They did everything they could to mess with me and some of them had these things with laser beams. I had a green light in my whole face, and Zambrotta got mad. He went to the referee.

"What the hell, they're bothering Ibra. They're dazzling him!"

But what was there to do? Search through the whole stand? You couldn't do that and I was fully focused. They could have put a head beam and head lights on me. I just wanted to step up the shot and this time I knew exactly: the ball was going in the right corner of the GK, and I stood there for a couple of seconds, and of course, somewhere I felt: I had to score this one. I had started my season my missing a penalty. It couldn't happen again. But I wasn't allowed to think about it. You should never think too much on the pitch. You should just play and I ran and took a shot.

I took the shot just as I had planned, and it went in, and I raised my arms and looked the Inter Ultras straight in the eyes, like: your fucking tricks don't work. I'm stronger than that, and I must say, the whole

stadium was thundering and I looked at the big screen: "Inter – Milan, zero – one, Ibrahimovic", it felt good then. I was back in Italy then.

But still, we had only started the game, and the fight got harder. Fifteen minutes into the second half Abate got a red card, and it's no game to play with ten men against Inter. We fought like animals. Materazzi was on me like a leech, and in a duel a couple of minutes later I rushed towards the ball and ran into him and I totally floored him. It was involuntarily of course. But he remained on the ground, and doctors and all the Inter players ran to us and the hatred from the Ultras just grew, especially when Materazzi was carried out on a stretcher.

The last twenty the pressure on us was terrible, and I was all done. I wanted to puke due to fatigue. But we made it. We kept our lead, and won. The day after I was getting my fifth Golden Ball in Sweden. They gave me information about that beforehand, and honestly I wanted to get in bed early, as early as one can with a game like that on your mind. But we decided to go out and party at a night club named Cavalli. Helena also came. We sat quietly in a corner with Gattuso while Pirlo and Ambrosini and everyone were partying like crazy. It was such a relief everywhere, a crazy joy, and we didn't get home until four in the morning.

In December Milan bought Antonio Cassano. Cassano kind of had the same bad boy reputation like me, and he likes to be seen and talk about himself as a fantastic player. The guy have been through a lot and often got in fights with players and coaches, amongst them Capello in Roma. Capello had even come up with an expression – Cassanata, which means irrational and crazy. But Cassano has a wonderful quality in his game. I really liked him, and we became a better team.

But there was one problem. The feeling sneaked up on me. I started feeling burned out. I had given everything in every game, and I don't think I've ever felt such a pressure. That can sound strange given everything I've been through. It was rough to come to Barca. It wasn't easy in Inter either. But here I felt it more than ever, we must win the league and I was the leader. I played every game like it was a WC final kind of, and I paid a price. I got worn out.

In the end, I had no outlet for my ideas and images on pitch. The body was one step behind, and I probably should have rested in a game of two. But Allegri was new. He also wanted to win at every cost. He needed his Zlatan and he pressed every drop out of me. Not that I blame him, not at all.

He was just doing his job and I wanted to play. I had a nice flow. I had rhythm. I would have wanted to play with a broken leg and Allegri pumped me up very good. We had respect for each other. But I paid a price, and I wasn't so young anymore.

I was physically big, not like Juventus during the second season, not at all. There was no fast food, no overweight. I was on a strict diet. All of it were muscles, but I was older and a different type of player than the start of my career. I wasn't a dribbler anymore, no Ajax guy. I was a heavy explosive striker and I had to play smarter to be able to keep up in all games and in February I started to feel tired.

It was supposed to be a secret in the club, but it got out to media and there was a lot of talk about it. Will he hold? Can he make it? We were also starting to lose points in the end of several games. We couldn't hold it up the whole way and we let in some unnecessary goals, and during one month I didn't score at all. The body lacked the real explosiveness, and we went out against Tottenham in the CL and that was obviously not good, we were the better team, I believed. But also in the league we lost the initiative, and Inter were playing very good again.

Would they pass us in the table? Would we lose the grip we had on the league? There were talks about that. They wrote about everything, and nothing got better from my suspensions. The first one was against Bari, a bottom team. We were down one-zero and I were in the box and a defender held me and I felt constricted. I reacted instinctively. I hit him with the palm of my hand in the stomach and he went down in the grass, totally idiotic by me. I admit.

But it was a reflex, nothing else, I wish that I had a better explanation. I don't. Football is a fight. You get attacked and you get even, and sometimes you go too far without knowing why. I've done it many times. During the years I've learned a lot. I'm not the mad man from MFF anymore, but the thing never goes out of me completely. I winner instinct has a downside. I get pissed, and that time against Bari I got a red card. Red cards can make anyone crazy. But I got off the pitch without saying a word. Cassano scored one for



us not much later. It was a comfort. But damn, I was suspended, not only in the next game against Palermo but also in the new derby against Inter.

The Milan management tried to protest. It was a whole thing around it. But it didn't work, and that sucked of course. But I didn't take it as hard as I used to back in the days. It's true. The family helped there. You can't bury yourself anymore. The children come in between. But the curse continued. I played again against Fiorentina and it looked like I was going to do good. We were leading and it was only a couple of minutes left. Then I got a throw in against me. I got pissed, and shouted "Vaffanculo", go to hell, to the lines man and of course, that wasn't good, especially not with what happened against Bari in mind. But come on? Have you been on a pitch? People say vaffanculo and shit like that all the time. They're not shown out because of that. They don't get suspended in several games. The referee's let it slide, at least most of the time.

You hear rough language out there all the time. But I was Ibra. Milan was Milan. We were leading the league. There was politics in it. They saw a chance to punish us. I believe that. I was suspended in three games. It looked like that idiotic thing could cost us the scudetto, and the club did everything they could to save the situation. We came up with a defense. We said that I had sworn to myself. We had to fight back: "He was mad about his mistakes on the pitch. He was talking to himself."

But honestly, that was bullshit, sorry for that! On the other hand the punishment was ridiculous. Vaffanculo? It was stupid by me. But still it was nothing. When it comes to swearing, it's not even a harsh word. You must know, I have heard worse. But it was what it was. I had to accept it and take mockery and stuff like that and an "award" from a TV channel, its called Tapiro d'Oro. That's the game. You're hailed. You're brought down. I'm used to it.

In the league Napoli had taken the number two spot in front of Inter. Napoli had their best period in the eighties when Maradona played for the club but had problems in recent years and was back in the top now.

We were three points in front of them and we had six games left, I was suspended in three of them. It was shit, and still; I got the chance to rest and think about my life. I worked on this book. I had to remember and it hit me, I haven't been the nicest guy. I haven't said the right stuff all the time, and I take responsibility for everything of course. I don't blame anyone else.

But still, there are a lot of people like me out there, young boys and girls who get yelled at because they're not like everyone else, and sometimes, of course, they should get yelled at. I believe in discipline. But what pisses me of is all those coaches who never could manage to get to the top but still are so sure: We should do it like this and in no other way! It's so simple. So stupid!

There are thousands way to go, and the one that's special and awkward is often the best one. I hate it when those you stand out are pushed down. If I hadn't been different I wouldn't be sitting here and obviously I don't mean: Be like me. Try to be like Zlatan! Not at all! I'm talking about walking your own path, what that path now may be, and no one should be fucking go around with lists or freeze you out just because you're not like the others.

But of course, it's not good if you mess up the scudetto you had promised your club just because you have a hell of a temper.

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## CHAPTER 28

Adriano Galliani was sitting there at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome with his eyes closed, praying: "We must win, we must win", and I really understand him. It was the seventh of May 2011. It was half past ten at night and the minutes were passing by. They passed too slowly, and Allegri and the guys on the bench were nervous. No matter if you believed in God or not it was a good time to pray. We played against Roma, and if we only got one point the scudetto would be ours, the first one in seven years.

I was back on the field. How good didn't that feel? I had been away quite some time because of my suspensions. But now I could take part in securing the league, not that I thought it would be easy. It was a war between Roma and Milan too, not just because those are the big cities. It was an important game for both teams.

We were fighting for the first place, and Roma for the fourth. Fourth place is a big thing because then you'll play the Champions League and that means a lot of money from TV-rights. But something had happened back in 1989, and you don't forget things that easily in Italian football. Things are in the walls, like I said. Things stay in the air. Everyone remembers the penalty Ronaldo didn't get that time. But this was something more serious. Antonio De Falchi, a young Roma supporter, travelled to Milan to watch Roma's game against Milan. His mother was worried: "Don't wear any red or yellow. Don't show that you're a Roma supporter." And the guy obeyed,

He dressed anonymously. He could be a kid from any club, but when one of Milan's hardcore supporters came up to him asking for a smoke, he was revealed immediately by his accent, and it was like "Are you a Roma supporter, you fuck?" and then he was surrounded. He was kicked and beaten to death. It was a terrible tragedy and before our game there was a tifo for him.

A tifo is a celebration from the stands, and Antonio De Falchi's name lit up the stadium in yellow and red colours, and that was a beautiful gesture of course, but it also affected the atmosphere in there. It was a big and nervy day. Totti is the big star in Roma. He's played for the club since he was thirteen years old. He's a god in Rome. He's won the World Cup, the top scorer award, the golden shoe, lots of things, and although he wasn't exactly young anymore, he had shown great form recently, so of course: there were Totti banners everywhere and Roma flags, but there were a lot of Milan- and Ibra banners as well. We had many fans who had travelled down there and hoping to celebrate the league victory, and bengal fires filled the place with smoke.

The game began at a quarter to nine, as always. Me and Robinho were on top. Cassano and Pato were on the bench and we started well. But in the fourteenth minute Vucinic came free. It felt like a goal, he'll score. But Abbiati, our goalie, made an incredible save. It was pure reflex, and things started to feel insecure. Roma had beaten us at the last game home at San Siro, and we fought even harder. I was chasing up there, and I had several chances and Robinho hit the post. Prince Boateng had an amazing chance but didn't score, and time passed. 0-0 would be enough, and the clock kept ticking and finally ninety minutes had passed. It should be over.

Then the fucking referee says: Five minutes extra time! Five minutes, and we kept playing and honestly, I think more people than Galliani were praying. Seven years without a scudetto is a long time for a club like Milan, and now we were close, and do you remember that? I had promised we would win again. It was the first thing I said when they presented me at San Siro, and of course, athletes say lots of different things. They promise gold and success, and still it turns out like shit. But some, like Muhammad Ali, they really kept their promises and I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to talk and deliver. I had come to Milan with my mentality and I had cursed and promised and worked and fought and now... the seconds were counted down, ten, nine, eight, seven... and there!

The ref blew his whistle and the victory was ours. Everyone stormed the pitch and smoke came from the stands. People were screaming and singing. It was beautiful and chaotic. It was absolutely wonderful, and Allegri, our coach, was thrown in the air and Gattuso ran around with a magnum champagne bottle spraying and pouring on everyone. Cassano was interviewed by television and everyone around me was totally crazy. It was a lot: "Thank you Ibra, you kept your promise", but also crazy things.

We were all high on adrenaline, and Cassano is a cool guy. He could use a kick. I walked past him and the TV-crew and fired a foot in his head, not hard, of course not, but not light either and he flinched.

"What's he doing?" the reporter asked.

"He's crazy."

"Seems like that!"

"But a player who helps us win the league can do anything he wants to", Cassano said and laughed.

But he was in pain. He walked around with a bag of ice to his head afterwards. Maybe a bit of rough love, and then the party began. I didn't fall asleep in a bathtub that night. But it was quite wild, and honestly, when I thought about it, it was big. I had been six years in Italy and won the scudetto every year. Has anyone else done that? I doubt it, and we didn't just win the league. We also won the Supercoppa, the meeting between the winner of the league and the cup. We went to China. There was chaos around me there too, and I scored and was man of the match and got my eighteenth title trophy, my eighteenth, and I was happy, to tell you the truth.

But something had happened to me. Football wasn't everything anymore. I had my family, and I had said no to the national team. I liked Lars Lagerbäck. But still I hadn't forgotten about that thing in Gothenburg. I don't forget easily, and I wanted more time with Helena and the boys. That's why I didn't play with Sweden for a while, but still, it had been that last summer in Barca when many things were so difficult and I felt like the different and difficult guy from the suburbs again, he who didn't really fit in.

That summer many of my teammates in Barcelona played and won the World Cup, and I felt it more and more: I miss that, but not that I was going back to the national team. It took too much time. I was almost never at home with the kids. I missed so many things. But around that time Lasse Lagerbäck quit. Erik Hamrén became the new coach of the national team. He called me:

"Hi there. I'm the new coach."

"I have to tell you right away", I said. "I have no plans coming back."

"What?"

"I don't know what you've been told. Maybe you've been given some false promises, but I'm not playing."

"Damn, Zlatan. That surprises me. I had no idea."

But he was a stubborn bastard. I like stubborn bastards. He kept going: It's gonna be awesome. It's gonna be good, all that stuff, and I invited him to our house in Malmö, and I immediately felt, this guy is cool. We synced. He wasn't a normal Swedish coach. He dared crossing some lines and those guys are always the best. I don't believe in too many rules, you know that. Sometimes you have to break some rules. That's when you progress. I mean: what happened with the guys in MFF's youth team who always behaved? Are there books written about them?

I finally said yes and we agreed, I would become the captain and be a leader also in our national team. I liked it. I even liked the fact that I would be the one taking the crap from media if we lost. It got me going, and when I met the guys in the team I could see that they were thinking: What the fuck is this? Normally a few fans come and watch us practice. Over six thousand came to this little gathering in Malmö, and I calmly said:

"Welcome to my world!"

Coming to Malmö is always special. Sure, I'm often there. Malmö is our home. But then we usually stay at home in our house. It's something else playing there. That's when the memories come back to me. The summer after the scudetto and the Supercoppa win Malmö FF and us in Milan were going to play a friendly. The negotiations had been going on for a long time between the clubs and the sponsors, but when tickets went on sale people were lining up. It was raining, I've heard. People were standing in long lines with their umbrellas and the tickets sold out in twenty minutes. The pressure was incredible and there were lines back and forth in Pildamms Park.

I've said some shit about Malmö FF through the years. I didn't forget what Hasse Borg and Bengt Madsen did, but I love the club too, and won't forget when we came to Malmö that day. The whole city took me in its arms. It felt like a carnival. There was chaos everywhere and roadblocks and hysteria and crowds. People were jumping and screaming when they saw me. Many had been there for hours just to get a glimpse of me. Malmö had a party. Everyone was waiting for Zlatan, and I had ran into many stadiums with crowds screaming and cheering. But that was special; it was both then and now.

I was my life which came back and the entire stadium was singing and screaming my name. In that old documentary, "Blådårar", I'm sitting on a train just talking freely:

"I've decided one thing", I say. "I'm getting a purple Diablo, a car, Diablo, it's a Lamborghini. And the plate will say: Toys... in English."



It's kind of childish. I was young. I was eighteen, and an awesome car was the coolest thing for a kid like me and world was waiting for me. But those words went all around: Did you hear what that guy Zlatan said, that little jerk. A purple Diablo! It was a long time ago. It was far away, but still close somehow, and that night at the stadium in Malmö, the fans folded out a huge cloth that covered the whole section and I was looking at it, and it took a second. Then I got it. It was a drawing of me next to car with the plate "Toys".

"Zlatan, come home. We'll get you the dream car" it said.

That felt in my heart, or like one of my friends said once: It's all a fairy tale. It's a journey from those hoods to a dream.

Not too long ago someone sent me a photograph, a picture of the Annelunds bridge. That bridge is on the border of Rosengård, and on that bridge someone had put up a sign: "You can take a guy away from Rosengård, but you can't take Rosengård out of a guy" it said, signed Zlatan.

I hadn't heard about that. It was news to me and during this time I got injured. I sprained a foot and went home to Malmö for a few days to do rehab. I had a fitness coach from Milan with me, and one afternoon we went out to the bridge to take a look at that quote. It was a special feeling. It was summer and it was warm and I got out of the car and looked at that sign and felt that something was happening to me. That place was special.

It was under that bridge that my dad was robbed and got his lung punctured. Not far away is the tunnel where I ran home scared in the dark to my mom on Cronmans street and had the lampposts as beacons. It was my childhood neighbourhood. The streets where everything began, and I felt, how can I put it? Big and small at the same time.

I was the hero returning home. I was the football star, but also the scared kid inside that tunnel again, he who thought he'd make it if only he ran fast enough. I was everything at once, and I promise, a hundred memories came back to me.

I remembered my dad with his headphones, the empty fridge and the beer cans, but also how he carried my bed on his back, mile after mile, and how he watched over me at the hospital. I remembered my mom's face when she got back from her cleaning jobs, and her hug when I left for the World Cup in Japan. I remembered my first football shoes; the ones I bought at Ekohallen for fifty-nine ninety next to the tomatoes and vegetables, and I remembered my dreams about becoming the most complete football player I possibly could, and I thought: That dream came true and it wouldn't have been possible without all the great players and coaches I had played with and I felt, I was grateful. There was Rosengård. There was the tunnel. Far away I could hear a train pass over the bridge. Someone pointed at me.

A woman wearing a veil came up to me and wanted to take a picture of the two of us and I smiled at her. People were starting to gather around me. It was a fairy tale, and I was Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

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(The End)

# **ROSENGÅRD**

"MAN KÄNTA EN KILLE FRÅN ROSENGÅRD  
MEN MAN KAN INTE TA ROSENGÅRD FRÅN EN KILLE"

CITAT ZLATAN



Some final pics...

First Scudetto with Milan



New Sweden coach Erik Hamrén

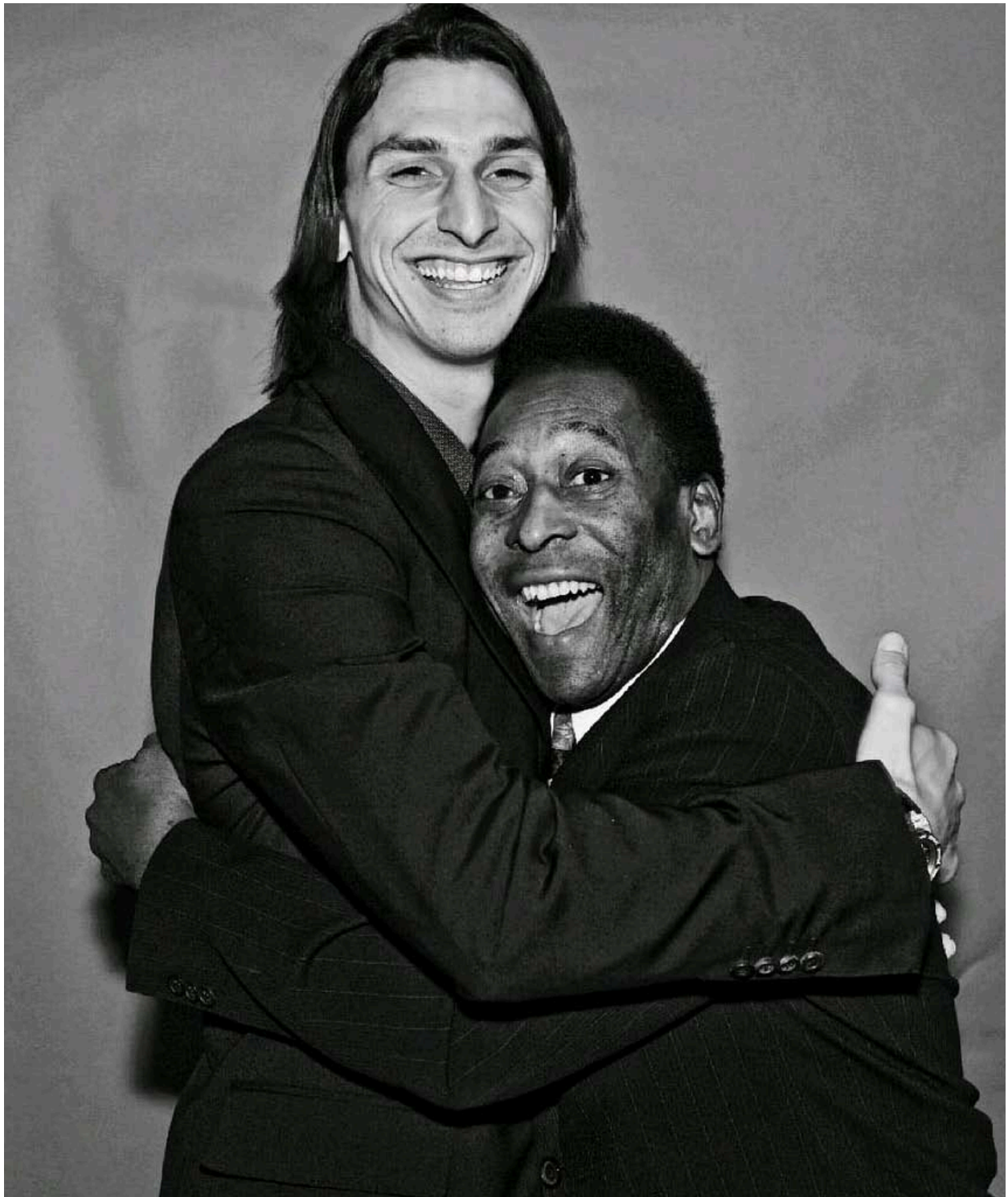


Zlatan camp

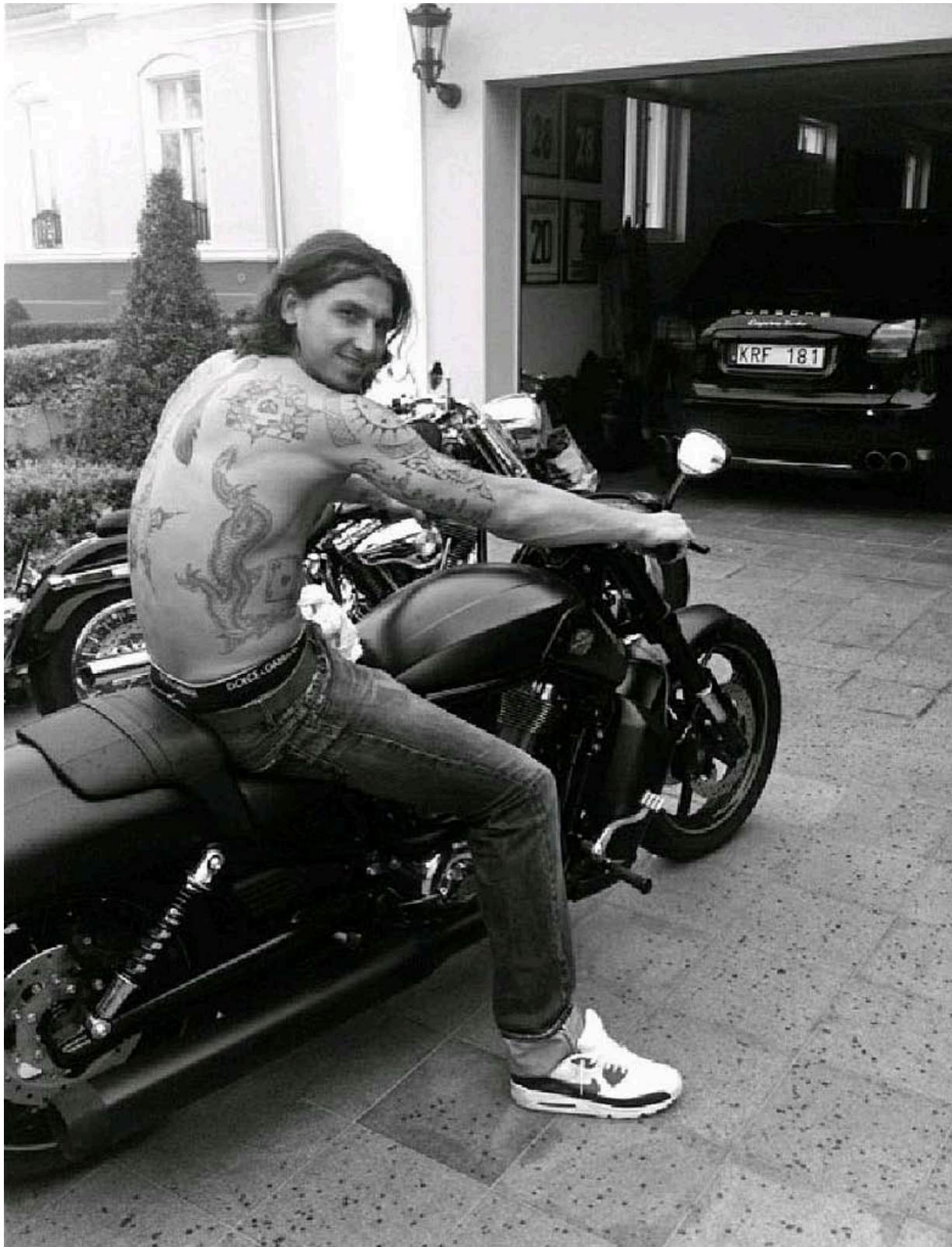




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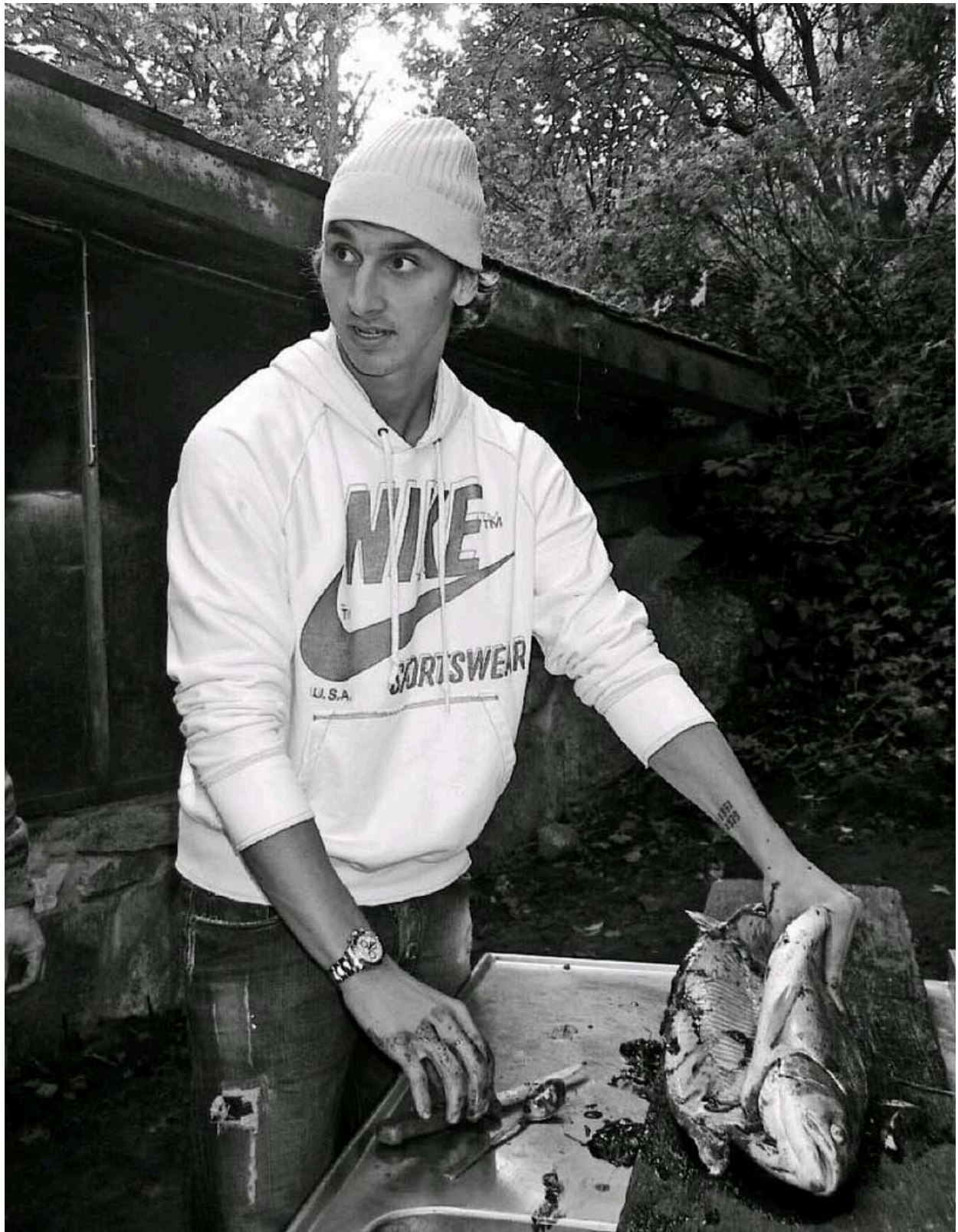
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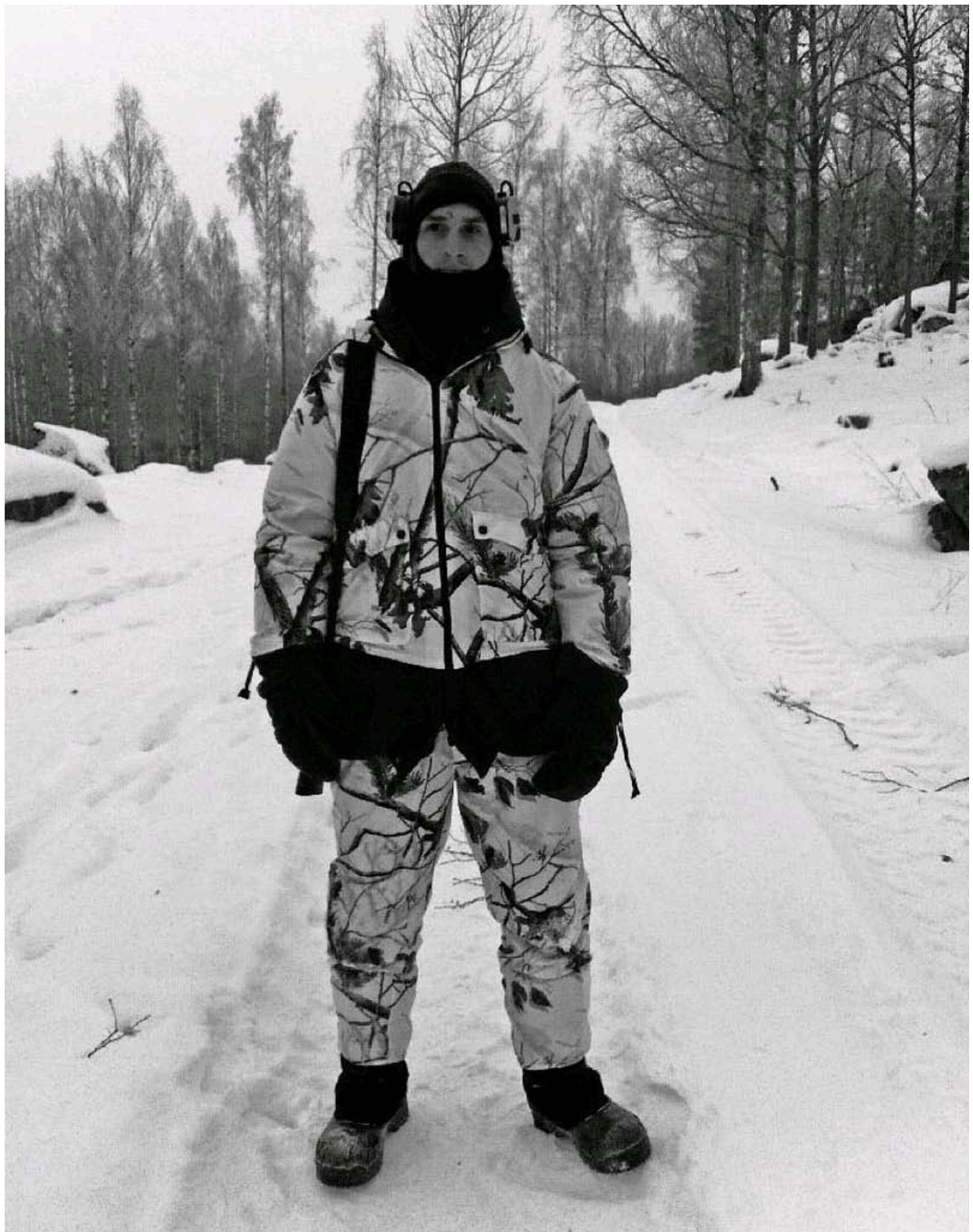
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